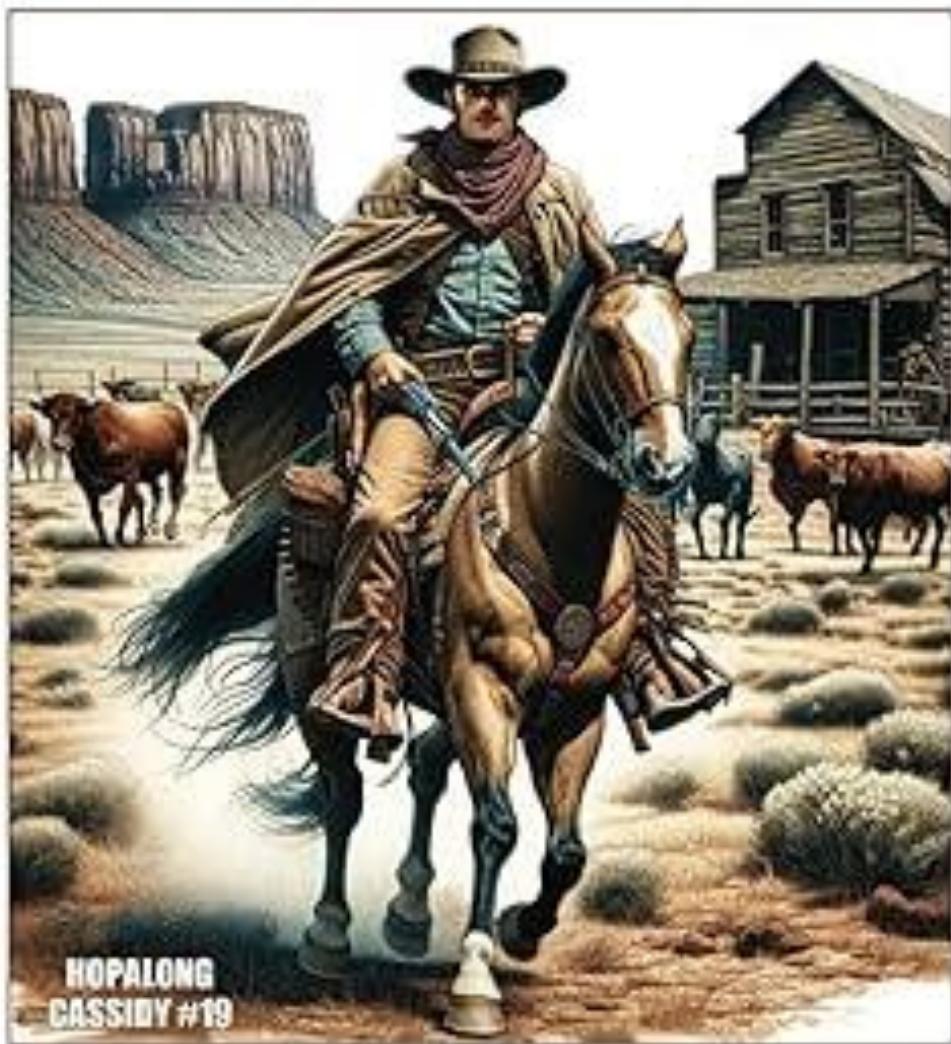


CLARENCE E. MULFORD

MESQUITE
JENKINS



HOPALONG
CASSIDY #19

THE MAN FROM BAR 20
JOHNNY NELSON
THE BAR 20 THREE
TEX
HOPALONG CASSIDY RETURNS
HOPALONG CASSIDY'S PROTÉGÉ
THE BAR 20 RIDES AGAIN
MESQUITE JENKINS
THE ORPHAN
BRING ME HIS EARS
BLACK BUTTES
RUSTLERS' VALLEY
COTTONWOOD GULCH
CORSON, OF THE JC

MESQUITE JENKINS

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| MESQUITE JENKINS | 4 |
| CHAPTER 1 - A TRAGEDY | 4 |
| CHAPTER 2 - INFORMATION | 14 |
| CHAPTER 3 - QUESTIONS ANSWERED | 18 |
| CHAPTER 4 - THE SHERIFF MOVES | 29 |
| CHAPTER 5 - THE BADGE OF THE LAW | 38 |
| CHAPTER 6 - GETTING ACQUAINTED | 44 |
| CHAPTER 7 - GROWING SUSPICIONS | 50 |
| CHAPTER 8 - AN ACCIDENT | 59 |
| CHAPTER 9 - TEXAS BOUND | 68 |
| CHAPTER 10 - ROUNDABOUT | 76 |
| CHAPTER 11 - MORE DISCOVERIES | 80 |
| CHAPTER 12 - THE LOST IS FOUND | 88 |
| CHAPTER 13 - THREATS AND DISSENSIONS | 93 |
| CHAPTER 14 - WHITTLING | 101 |
| CHAPTER 15 - RASCALS PLAN | 108 |
| CHAPTER 16 - THE END OF A TRAIL | 115 |
| CHAPTER 17 - NUMBER THREE | 122 |
| CHAPTER 18 - BROTHERS REUNITED | 133 |
| CHAPTER 19 - CONCERNING A KEY | 142 |
| CHAPTER 20 - HANDCUFFS UNLOCKED | 152 |
| CHAPTER 21 - THINGS MADE CLEAR | 160 |
| CHAPTER 22 - ALL SQUARE | 167 |

MESQUITE JENKINS

CHAPTER 1 - A TRAGEDY

The rider slowed and stopped as he topped the little rise, and looked through close-lidded eyes along the desert track, following it as it meandered over the straighter, more direct openings through sage, cactus, and greasewood, at times wavering and thinning in the quivering iridescence of heat waves streaming up from the hot desert floor.

There was no movement, no life save of himself and his horse, for this was the midday hour, and the desert dwellers sought sanctuary of warrens and the shade of sage and chaparral. The desert was hushed, deserted, concealing a teeming and tumultuous life as vicious as it was swift and short-lived. A distant range of burned brown mountains was indistinct in the heat haze, seemingly close at hand; but he knew better.

This was the trail he had been looking for, the main track between Franklin and Desert Wells. His short cut, taken with the calm assurance of the desert bred, had saved him a full day of riding—nearly forty miles. There was nothing unusual about this scene, one way or another. It was an accustomed environment, revisited after a year or more of absence. The heat, hovering between one hundred twenty and one hundred thirty at this hour of the day, was nothing to become uneasy about; he sensed it without any particular thought, accepted it tacitly. The glare of the sun was stopped by the brim of his big sombrero, but the reflected light, pouring up almost like a material thing from the desert floor, caused his lids partly to close. He rode on, letting his horse pick its way, set its own pace. A man on a holiday, with a year's wages in his pockets, had no need to hasten when haste was foolish. He had a destination, but also he had all the time he wanted in which to reach it, and the destination was not so important that it could not be changed if he felt like it. For weeks he had been riding south from a far Northern range, angling and pausing, riding slowly and riding rapidly, as his humour and the circumstances directed. He still had many miles to cover, in as many hours, days, or weeks as he chose.

The last year had made a tremendous difference in his life; in fact, the change had begun a year or two earlier, but this had been more of a probationary period, so tactfully imposed and directed that he had hardly been conscious of it. A mere youth, his careless steps had wandered down the easy slope that leads to crime and outlawry; but, through the influence of others, he had climbed the slope again before his digression had become really serious.

He smiled as he let his memory bring back that second year on the Montana range; as he thought, man by man, of that close-woven outfit, where daily precept had taken the place of preaching; of the courage, loyalty, and clean thinking which had taken on a dignity, in his slowly opening eyes, that was very much worth while. He had learned by close personal contact, through days and nights, that honesty, truthfulness, justice, clean thoughts, consideration for others—that these things are not namby-pamby; that they are not signs and measures of weakness, not sickish, not things for which apologies should be made. He had learned that such attributes are coloured by the individuals who practise them; that the great factor is the nature of the man himself. He had known the opposite attributes, had associated with those who practised them almost as a profession; they had been a hard crowd; but he chuckled as he thought of that hardness: hard as they were, they would have broken, crumpled, had they come in contact with that Northern outfit; hard as glass, they were, but soft to a diamond. Why, there was one man in that Northern outfit who would have cut them down as a scythe cuts grass.

A whirling dust devil caught his attention, and he idly watched its mad, erratic course across the desert sands, glad when he saw it break and sift down to earth. He glanced about him carelessly, and then his horse snorted and stopped. It was trembling, its delicate nostrils playing nervously. A movement caught his searching gaze. Something dirty-coloured had moved past an opening in the sage.

Instinctively his knees pressed against the saddle skirts and sent the nervous horse moving from the trail at a tangent. His hand rose and fell, the spurting smoke spreading along the ground, the crashing roar lost in the immensities of flat space. Heavy bodies rose from the sand, winging ponderously aloft, reluctant to leave. He rode past the dead vulture, and then stopped quickly as he caught sight of the vulture's magnet.

Face down on the sands was the body of a man, its neck showing a single slash where a vulture's beak had ripped. This meant that the man had only just died, for otherwise he would have been torn to ribbons by now; but how long he had lain there helpless was conjecture, how long he had watched those restless scavengers waiting for him to breathe his last could not be known.

The rider, tossing the reins over the horse's head, went ahead on foot the few remaining steps, his questioning eyes on the inert shape, searching, appraising, studying.

The earth has its messages for such as he, and he moved along a twisting track, which easily might have been overlooked by you or me. To the uninitiated too often the word "desert" brings up great reaches of sand, soft, deep, ridged, and

patterned by winds, where footprints lose identity in the unstable, sliding grains. Such prints would be larger than the feet which made them, their rims squashed outward from under the falling tread, and from those outer rims the inner surface sloped downward to the centre. Here the desert was hot, hard soil, covered with an armour of pebbles, slivered rock, and occasionally dusted lightly with rounded grains of sand, except where it was piled in windrows. The heels of a puncher's boots might have scratched it, but it seemed impervious to signs of progress on hands and knees. To the stranger's eyes the marks were plain: small crescents cut here and there by curved and digging fingers; an almost imperceptible line where the toe of a boot had dragged; the unvarnished side of a larger pebble facing upward, and the hole whence it had been scratched.

The stranger noticed that the tracks described a curve, and he pushed on wonderingly. The curve was constant, and seemed to have been purposefully made, since there was not an aimless twist or bend in it. Reaching the trail he found a wealth of signs: hoof prints made by iron shoes, marks of a fall, shown by the ground and a broken sage; red-brown spots which had been hurriedly sucked of moisture by the parched earth; and now the hoof prints which he had idly noticed as he had ridden along the main trail told him an interesting fact. The unfortunate man had been riding in the same direction as his own; he had noticed that the bullet which had brought death had gone in the back, under the left shoulder: therefore, the man who had fired the shot had been behind both the stranger, as he now stood, and the victim. This was something that could wait. The dead man came first.

The stranger went back along the tragic tracks and stopped again beside the body. Yes, the bullet had been fired from behind; but to make certain of this he gently turned the body over. Opening the blue shirt, one glance told him that his conjecture had been correct. This, then, was murder: cold, cowardly. He studied the elderly bronzed face; the grizzled beard with its stain of brown around the lips; the pale blue eyes; the sombrero, coat, and everything else to be seen. The gun lying on the ground had not been fired. It was a revolver not very common in that place and time: a Smith and Wesson reissue of 1877, shooting the .44 Russian cartridge, and a gun of exceptional accuracy so far as regular issue weapons were concerned; but this weapon had been used and abused so much that the rifling in the end of the barrel had been worn almost smooth.

Why had this unknown man steadily curved to the right as he crawled and dragged himself away from the trail? Why had he left the trail, where help might be more reasonably expected than out here, a hundred yards into desolation? The stranger nodded in a satisfied way, went to his horse, and rode forward on a

continuation of that pitiful trail, seeking visual proof of what he already knew to be the true explanation. It was not long before he found it; another gathering of greedy vultures, this time around a startlingly mottled piebald range horse, dead on its side. Its tracks curved back to the main trail parallel with those made by the man, but with a much greater radius. It had been killed by a shot through the head.

It was plain now, the reason for the dead man's curving trail: he had crawled doggedly toward his loose horse, which had kept ahead of him on a greater circle. The stranger could see this terrible scene: the moving piebald, the crawling man slowly bleeding to death; the blazing sun, the desert silence, a murderer grimly waiting; a murderer who did not have the decency to finish his victim out of hand, but who took an indirect though no less certain method. The death of the horse spelled death for its owner.

The stranger followed his own track back to the body and thence to the main trail, which he crossed before he began his circle. After a few minutes of riding he cut and followed another set of horse tracks. This set had followed the trail, but distant from it two hundred yards. Then, behind a clump of greasewood, where the alkali was thick and scabby, he stopped and read a book which was plain to his eyes.

The killer had dismounted here, picketed his horse in a little gully, walked to this clump of greasewood, and sat down, cross-legged, like a Turk or a cowboy. Half a dozen cigarette stubs told that no small interval had been passed here. Hand and leg prints, on the right side, showed how he had arisen, presumably with the rifle in his left hand. The left foot, plain in the yielding surface, was ahead and to the left of a deep knee print. So he, a right-handed man, had knelt and fired. The empty shell lay a little more to the right. The stranger pocketed it before he followed the boot prints around the clump and back again. Going out, they were those of a running man, the sharp heels driven deep on the turn; coming back, they were walking steps, leading straight toward the picketed horse. These walking steps were carefully measured, in terms of his own stride, by the stranger. Mounting again, he followed the tracks of the murderer's horse to the main trail, and across it, at a point three hundred yards from the place where the victim had been dropped. They stopped and swung sharply back to the main trail and along it out of sight.

The stranger stopped, too, and looked studiously from this point to the place where the dead piebald lay. The shot had been an amazing one for such a distance with such a gun. No man but an expert rifle shot could have made it; and with a .45-70 repeating rifle it was almost beyond belief. No, not quite beyond belief:

Red Connors, up there in Montana, could have done as well, and then repeated it to prove it was not an accident; but when one unconsciously linked the marksmanship of an unknown man with that of Red Connors it was a compliment, indeed. This killer was a wonderful shot, with rifle, at least.

He looked down hopefully. Yes, there it lay, its brassy surface glinting in the sun. He swung down gracefully, picked it up, and then struck straight for the dead man. The vultures had drawn close again, and one was so desperate and vicious as to show a sign of fight. One shot cured it and drove the others off. In a few minutes the stranger rode on again, carrying a burden as heavy as himself, face down across the saddle blanket, tied snugly against the cantle. No more did he ride carelessly, apathetically; for the killer might be holed up somewhere, ready to object to such close interest in his affairs. The stranger smiled grimly and hoped that the first shot would miss; after that, if it did, he would endeavour to give an exhibition of Ute trailing and Red Connors's rifle work. It was a combination bordering upon perfection.

It was mid-afternoon when the stranger rounded a rocky hummock at the far end of a narrow trail through the ridge and saw the town of Desert Wells sprawled before him on the low bench; and he also saw that this farther side of the ridge was nowhere near as desert like as the other. A turn in the trail had brought him face to face with a good cattle country, and here he felt even more at home than he had back on the desert wastes. The trail joined a narrow road which skirted the ridge, and it was not long before he entered the town itself. Stopping at the first building, its faded sign proclaiming it to be Parsons's Saloon, he dismounted and went inside.

Parsons himself was behind the bar.

"Where's th' sheriff or th' coroner?" asked the stranger, now hearing excited voices in the street outside.

Parsons looked at the speaker, his face grimly curious.

"Peculiar combination," he observed, and he had used his eyes so well by this time that nothing about the stranger, on the surface, was undiscovered.

"There come both of 'em," he said, bobbing his head toward the door.

The stranger turned slowly and saw two men push through the crowd now milling about the front door. They were commonplace, these officials, of medium stature, with bronzed and wrinkled faces, and the hair of both had been well bleached by the sun. The eyes of the first were a pale blue; of the other, a slate-gray. Both wore scrawny moustaches, and the age of neither could be easily approximated.

"That yourn?" asked the first, whose five-pointed badge bore his title in capital letters.

"Where'd you find him?" asked the second curiously.

The stranger removed his hat and wiped his forehead with a dusty sleeve.

"It ain't mine," he said to the sheriff. "Three hours back on th' Franklin trail," he said to the coroner.

"Why didn't you let him lay an' bring th' news to me, instead?" asked the sheriff coldly, and his companion emphatically nodded.

"I had to kill two vultures out of a score to keep him from bein' eaten while I looked around. Nothin' else has been touched, an' there's plenty of evidence left."

"What kind of evidence?" asked the sheriff.

"Signs—lots of 'em. Here's one bit," and the stranger handed over an empty shell.

"H'm! .45-70," muttered the sheriff, rolling it in his fingers, his gaze on the dented fulminating cap.

"Just scratch some kind of a mark on th' side of this, stranger, so it can be identified," requested the sheriff, returning the shell. He watched the stranger's knife point scratch a double X, and then he took the shell and put it in his pocket. He turned to the coroner.

"Reckon we better take him over to Murphy's," he said. "We oughta be able to hold th' inquest to-night. He won't keep well in this heat, an' Murphy can't embalm worth a cuss."

He spoke to the stranger again.

"Reckon you better come along an' git yore hoss. You've got to take us back there, anyhow."

The stranger nodded and obeyed the sheriff's gesture, lining up at the bar with the two officials. He was last on the line, and gave his order after his two companions had made known their wishes.

"Sarsapariller," he said.

The two officials looked their frank disbelief, and the man behind the bar leaned forward quickly.

"Sarsapar——" said the latter, not completing the word. His lips curved unpleasantly. "Wall, now, damned if I got any."

Nor milk, neither."

"I know better than to ask for milk on a cow ranch," said the stranger. "What

you got aside from likker?"

"Hell, I got a lemon," answered Parsons, not as free with his facial contortions, and keeping the inflection of his voice within safe limits. He was now beginning to discover things that his first gleanings had failed to find. The stranger had been regarding him with a cold, level gaze, and something came to the bartender with great clarity and suddenness.

"You squeeze it, then, in water," said the stranger, and thereupon aided in keeping the silence intact.

The drinks disposed of, three rounds of them, the stranger shoved his two cigars into a pocket and followed the officers out to the horse.

In silence they went to Murphy's, the local undertaker, who would have reached for his gun had anyone called him a mortician, and who could not embalm worth a cuss. Evidently he was a much better hardware merchant, as suggested by the stock on his shelves and his evident prosperity. A trip, slowly and in step, to Murphy's back room marked one duty done, and the three emerged in customary and becoming silence and gravity.

Someone following the crowd had brought up two horses and turned them over to the officers. In a moment the three men were riding along the bench road leading toward the desert trail to Franklin.

"Seein' as how you got there first," said the sheriff as they drew away from the town and whatever itching ears it might contain, "you might tell us about it." His glance had rested on the rifle in the stranger's saddle scabbard.

"Mine's a .45-70," said the stranger coldly. "Take it out an' look at it, if you want."

"Shucks," grunted the sheriff. "Be lots of time for that later. Did you find him on th' trail?"

The stranger told his story briefly, but not quite all of it. He was nettled and perfectly willing to let his companions do some of their own work themselves. At the conclusion of the recital the coroner turned his head.

"He couldn't 'a' been dead very long, th' way them vultures acted. You must 'a' been right close to there when he died."

"Mebby; he was plumb limp, if that means anythin' to you."

"It means somethin', that an' them vultures," said the coroner.

The sheriff pulled at his moustache.

"See anybody?"

"No."

"H'm. If the hombre that did this killin' was ahead of you on th' trail he could 'a' been seen, out there, for quite a ways.

Must 'a' beat you to town, huh?"

"He started back th' way he come," replied the stranger, "toward Franklin. An' if he didn't want to be seen, he couldn't 'a' been seen for quite a ways, out there."

"Seems you took a lot of interest in this here murder, if it was one," suggested the coroner professionally.

"Seems as though I did, but what of it? Shouldn't I oughta?" asked the stranger in mild surprise. "Citizen's duty, I take it."

"Kinda pert, ain't you?" demanded the coroner, slightly huffed.

"Don't reckon so, but I never did have th' tail-waggin' habit."

There was no reply to this, and another silent interval ensued.

Both officers stole occasional glances at their companion, supplementing and checking up on the franker scrutiny they had enjoyed back in Parsons's Saloon: What they saw might have disturbed less worthy souls. A calm, unemotional, and very cold face, with thin lips and a pair of eyes that had a trick of becoming frosty. The pair of Colts on the stranger's thighs were tied down for an unhampered draw. Most men found it sufficient to carry but one; but there were some who had attained professional dexterity who made it a point to carry two. This was unwise if the dexterity was insufficient, for two guns bespoke the professional, and there were certain ambitious souls upon whom this conceit acted as an irritant. Some of them regarded the two-gun affectation much as small boys regard a chip on the shoulder.

"Did you notice anythin' special?" asked the sheriff, his hounding instincts arousing themselves to a fresh effort. "Any particular signs?"

The stranger was canny when dealing with strangers, and he still smarted under that look at his scabbarded rifle; still, it had been perfectly natural in a peace officer.

"Quite some cayuse tracks," he answered. "I kept off of 'em th' best I could. All I wanted to know was two things: First, if there was any life in that feller to be saved; second, if th' shooter was hangin' round within gunshot of me." He let his eyes rest calmly on the coroner's face. "If I'd had any sense I'd 'a' come on my way an' let him lay there an' forgot all about it."

"H'm," said the coroner unpleasantly.

"H'm," echoed the sheriff, not at all unpleasantly. "Glad you didn't. His wife will want to know. Kinda uncertain when a man don't come back an' nobody knows why."

"You know him?" asked the stranger.

"Yep. Name's Tobe Ricketts, owner of th' Lazy S, over east of town. Tobe warn't none too well liked. He was havin' some kinda trouble with his men. Don't know what his widder will do now, with one thing an' another like it is."

"One of th' first settlers, Tobe was; an' sorta had th' idear that th' hull range belonged to him," supplemented the coroner, thawing a little, perhaps because of the desert's heat. He spoke without bias or warmth, but he caught the sheriff's warning glance and felt hastily for tobacco and papers.

Mile after mile rolled behind them and then the stranger drew rein and pointed ahead on the trail.

"There's where I started," he said. "You want me to come along?"

The answering grunts were affirmative, and they rode first to where the body had lain, the stranger explaining its position and pointing out his own tracks. Then he fell in behind and let his companions lead the way. They did not back-track, either through poor eyesight, or because they did not believe it necessary, but rode on to where they were told they would find the horse. Vultures arose from it as they drew near, but were soon allowed to return and continue their feast.

"Lazy S piebald that he mostly rode," said the sheriff. "Where's th' tracks of th' feller that did th' shootin'?"

They stopped again at the alkali depression and looked around for a few minutes. The tracks of the off caulk of the near front shoe of the killer's horse did not show, although the other caulks were plain enough in the crust. The stranger said nothing, showed only casual interest; but his eyes missed nothing that his keen and thorough training told him was worth studying. He idly pulled a stem of salt grass, withered and sere, and gently chewed one end of it; and when the officers turned their backs to bend down over a boot print, he swiftly measured a print near his hand, broke off the stem, and put it in his pocket.

"Where'd you find th' ca'tridge?" suddenly asked the sheriff, without turning his head.

"Right back there, where he knelt."

"H'm. Shot Tobe in th' back. Let's foller his sign an' see where he got back on th' main trail, where he shot th' hoss."

It did not take them long to reach the spot, and one glance was all the sheriff wanted. He took the shell out of his pocket and idly turned it over and over and end for end.

"Reloaded ca'tridge," he grunted. "Well, there's aplenty of them in this country, though th' primer may tell us somethin'

when we get a chance to force it out. Don't know as there's any difference in th' various makes, but that can wait. Th' calibre ain't very talkative, neither; I know a dozen men that use th' same ca'tridge. H'm."

The stranger smiled coldly, drew his Winchester from the scabbard, and offered it for inspection.

"What you doin' now?" asked the sheriff in mild surprise.

"You seemed to be curious about this gun," explained its owner, "back there on th' trail. You better look it over before I get rid of it."

"Shucks," grunted the sheriff, with a show of amiability. "I don't have to look at that. I looked at th' tracks of yore hoss in town an' at yore boot tracks out here. I ain't as dumb, mebby, as some folks reckon; but, not with standin' th' fact that I find yore tracks out here just like I oughta find 'em if you didn't do th' shootin', an' just to please you, I'll take th' gun. Hand her over."

The sheriff handed his friend the empty shell, took the rifle, pushed down the lever to see that the gun was loaded, and then fired into the ground. He caught the shell as it came out of the barrel, examined it swiftly, held it out against the one in the coroner's hand, and smiled.

"Look at th' prints of th' firin' pins," he said. "Yourn is deeper, sharper, smaller, an' plumb centre; th' killer's is shallow, blunt, a mite bigger, an' a mite to one side. His rifle's purty well wore, while yourn is like new." He tossed it from him before the stranger could check the movement, and then chuckled at the instant retrieving of it.

The stranger did not try to justify his action, but he did not intend to have that shell lying about on the scene of the murder.

"Well, let's go back an' hold th' inquest," suggested the coroner.

"Reckon we might as well," acquiesced the sheriff. "I know th' verdict right now."

"Murder by some person unknown," said the coroner, and wheeled about to return to Desert Wells. Four hours later he was proved to be a prophet, for that was the verdict of his jury. There was one thing about this inquest which was striking and illuminating to the stranger. This jury was very easily satisfied with three sworn statements: the finding of the body, the course of the bullet, and the position of the supposed murderer. Not a single bit of detail as to other proof was demanded. The sheriff's professional secrets were not revealed, which must have been very gratifying to that officer.

CHAPTER 2 - INFORMATION

The death of Tobe Ricketts and the manner of it made a stir in the little town of Desert Wells. The first seemed to be taken with a degree of complacency that strongly suggested satisfaction; the second had a disturbing effect, for the verdict of the coroner's jury automatically put every ill-wisher of Tobe Ricketts under suspicion; and the number of ill-wishers was greatly in the majority.

This was soon apparent to the stranger, who had broken off his journey and tarried in town. He mixed with the crowd in Parsons's Saloon, which was the chief gathering point, and bit by bit his store of knowledge grew.

He learned that Tobe, who had reached his threescore years and ten, had been autocratic, domineering, and that he had claimed full grazing privileges over the entire range by right of priority. The fact that three other ranches had acquired title to their own particular range made little difference to Tobe, and he drove his herds where it pleased him to graze them, and furiously denounced the men who turned them back again. It was this that became responsible for the disintegration of his outfit, for his best men, knowing that they were trespassing, resented the job, resented the trouble that ensued, and at last, one by one, refused to obey the ranchman. One by one, they quit or were discharged, and their places taken, perforce, by men of lesser moral strength. In time Tobe's outfit became a collection of the worst type of men riding range; and they, according to their natures, had small loyalty for their boss, and worked only because the pay was large and for other reasons known only to themselves.

Five years before Tobe's death a new cattle outfit had moved into the country and turned its forty head loose on range which, because of its wildness, no man claimed. This lay on the far side of the basin's slope, against the distant ridges to the northeast. It was very rough country, and it was now dominated by rough men. Their brand was the Clover Leaf, better known locally as the Ace of Clubs because of its almost exact similarity to the single club pip on a playing card. All was in order with this outfit and its brand, for the latter was recorded and was a legitimate mark of ownership.

The stranger took no part in the discussions that went on about him unless directly questioned. He had told his story a dozen times, in the bare essentials, and another dozen times he had nodded confirmation to it when it was told by someone else; but while his vocal cords were mostly idle, his auditory apparatus was otherwise.

"I don't feel sorry for Tobe a damn bit," said one red-faced cowman, whose liquor had loosened his tongue; "but I shore do feel right sorry for Jane. Th' Lazy

S has had a lot of trouble th' last few years, an' shore has been goin' to th' dogs. Now it won't keep out of th' sheriff's hands for a great while. Why," he exclaimed, looking slowly around the circle, "do you fellers know th' figgers of th' last Lazy S sales?" Encouraged by the silence, he answered his own question. "Not one third what they was th' year before; an' th' year before they wasn't but half of th' year before that. Th' Lazy S shore is totterin'." He reached for his half-emptied glass, finished it, and wiped his lips. "Jane's headed for th' poorhouse, an' I'm right sorry for her; but Tobe got what he has been huntin' for, for near twenty years."

"How's th' Box O a-comin' along these days?" asked a man in a corner.

The first speaker, owner of the Box O, wiped his lips again as he peered at his questioner.

"Little mite better than last year," he said, with satisfaction. "We are growin', slow but steady."

"Ace of Clubs ship out many head this spring?" persisted the questioner, looking directly at another cowman, an unpleasant appearing person whose eyes were set too close together.

"We fell off quite some," came the instant answer, but the close-set eyes shifted to the stranger and away again.

"Wonder when the sheriff will get back?" mused a fourth in the circle. "I reckon he must 'a' struck straight for Franklin."

"You fellers all aimin' for to join in th' funeral to-morrow?" asked a fifth.

"I am!" came a snorted answer. "That's somethin' I been waitin' twenty years to do. I want to see Tobe underground an' covered up. He liked to ruin me, ten years back. I ain't no hypocrite: when a skunk dies that don't unmake my recollections of him. I hated Tobe when he was alive, an' I hate him now. I don't hold with murder, but now that he's dead, I'm right glad of it. Just th' same," he said, his voice losing its hard edge, "I feel like Zeke, here. Th' Box O had their troubles with th' Lazy S, didn't you, Zeke? Yes, you shore did; but it warn't Jane's fault. Reckon if it hadn't been for Jane old Tobe would 'a' been even worse. I feel right sorry for her, an' I'm announcin' myself as number one on th' list, if th' time comes, that is made up to keep her out of th' poorhouse."

"Right, Tom!" cried the owner of the Box O. "An' my name'll be right under yourn!" He looked around the circle and then caught the bartender's eye. "Set out another round, Parsons! This here round will be drunk to Jane Ricketts, widder of th' meanest man this country ever seen!"

"Which we drinks standin'," hiccupped a tearful voice, whose owner's villainous face was smirking with hypocrisy.

The stranger's cold eyes settled on this last speaker, and after a moment's close scrutiny turned to the coroner, who sat at hand.

"Who's th' standin' drinker?" he quietly asked.

"Pecos Sam," answered the coroner.

"Who's he?" persisted the stranger, who evidently was particular about the answers to his questions.

"One of th' owners of th' Ace of Clubs."

"An' where's their headquarters?"

"On th' first bench under Flat Top Mountain, near where th' river cuts through th' ridge. They been doin' purty well, them fellers has. Only had forty head when they come in here, among th' four of 'em. Now they must have over two hundred."

"How long have they been here?" persisted the stranger, flashing another glance at Pecos Sam, who did not notice it.

"'Bout five years."

"Forty head of cattle keep four men busy an' pervide grub an' clothes for 'em while they growed into two hundred head?" persisted the stranger.

"Oh, no; oh, no," answered the coroner. "They hire out. Hardworkin' outfit, they are. But they're slowly gettin' their toe holds."

"Slowly?" inquired the stranger, his voice hard. "You reckon it's slow when forty head of cattle become two hundred in five years, not countin' them that was sold an' sent over th' trail?"

"They put all their spare money in cattle an' take cattle as wages, sometimes," explained the coroner. He grinned. "We don't have no one hundred per cent. nat'ral increase down here in this country."

"I come blamed near believin' that you did," retorted the stranger, and allowed a thin grin to slip across his face.

"... never come from Franklin," said a voice, breaking through the noise of the general conversation.

"Then you figger he circled?" questioned a companion.

"Shore I do; what else should I believe?" asked the first voice in deep scorn. "Tobe warn't killed by no hombre from Franklin, an' you can lay to that."

The stranger did not appear to have heard this bit of talk, but he had heard it, and it served to put some sort of endorsement on his own theory, a theory which as yet was very nebulous, very discrete, hardly more than a shadow of a theory; but what few things had tended toward concretion pointed toward that

hypothesis: the murderer was not a man who lived in Franklin. The cold eyes skimmed the circle: the murderer might even be among those present in the room. Again the cold gaze rested on the Ace of Clubs man, the man who wanted to drink standing up.

As yet the stranger had no particular interest in this crime, being intrigued only by the mystery presented, the part he had taken after the commission of it, and his own peculiar attributes and training. His father, once held captive for years by the Mountain Utes, had been taught by those savages the finer points of trailing; practice not only had trained his father's senses but also had schooled his mind. He had been his father's closest companion, the relationship between the two was far stronger than the ordinary one of father and son; and he, in his turn, had been as avid for instruction, as keen in that Ute art as his father had been. He knew many things, even now, connected with the murder that the sheriff and the coroner and all the men roundabout would never have found out. For one thing, the sheriff and the coroner both had passed by that little tuft of horsehair hanging to a cactus leaf, and had been so eager to find signs that they had overlooked many of them.

The stranger's theory, which persisted in dominating his thought, was being added to, here and there, bit by bit; and it was an intriguing thing, this puzzle; but on the morrow it was to become even more so, to be bulwarked and supported by a keener interest, and one which eventually would hold him until the solving of itself and of other things. So it is that accidental things, outside one's own orbit, at last swing around, make a contact, and shape a man's destiny.

As the night grew older the crowd increased, and then slowly fell away until at last Parsons, the coroner, and the stranger were the only men in the room. Gradually their desultory conversation lapsed, and the proprietor arose to turn out the lights. The stranger and the coroner said their good-nights to him and passed out into the street, the door closing behind them.

The two men walked slowly toward the hotel, where the stranger had engaged accommodations.

"Ridin' on yore way again to-morrow?" asked the coroner, to make conversation.

"That wouldn't hardly be th' right thing to do, with th' sheriff absent," answered the stranger. "I aim to stay here till he says for me to move along again."

"Strikes me that is th' right thing to do, an' th' most sensible," replied the coroner thoughtfully. "Flight sometimes makes folks think wrong thoughts; an' there may be folks who would call it flight—'specially th' man who did it.

Personally, I didn't have no likin' for Tobe; but shore as hell I want that murderer caught an' hung. I hate to meet his widder tomorrow. She's a frail, bent mite of a thing, ten years older than th' record might say, an' th' record might say she is about sixty. Tough job she's got on her hands. Reckon she better sell out for what she can get." He coughed and spat. "She'll lose everythin', if she don't."

"Is that just a guess, or do you know what yo're talkin' about?"

"I know what I'm talkin' about, but I can't prove nothin', not a damned thing," replied the coroner. "Goin' to be a nice day, to-morrow, for th' funeral, if th' wind don't blow, 'though it gen'erally does for funerals. You better ride on out with me."

"Yes, I will," responded the stranger. "You think th' sheriff went to Franklin?"

"Why, yes; where else would he go?"

"I don't know. I just asked because I was wonderin' when he'd get back to town."

"Oh, he'll get back in time for th' buryin'. Haskins likes Jane Ricketts right well."

"Well, Coroner, I'll say good-night."

"Good-night, stranger. I'll be around for you in plenty of time to-morrow."

"I'll be waitin'."

The stranger watched the official move off in the moonlight, and then slowly, reluctantly, turned and entered the hotel. He would attend the funeral on the morrow, although he disliked the task; but that was not all he would do. If the sheriff really went to Franklin to find the murderer, then that officer was a bigger fool than he gave any signs of being. Oh, well, a mind trained to trailing leaps farther than one which is not. To-morrow would be another day, and, he hoped, an important one.

CHAPTER 3 - QUESTIONS ANSWERED

It was a three hours' ride to the headquarters of the Lazy S, over a road that for the most part ran straight. Half of the way the grade sloped gently downward, reached a rough but massive bridge of logs over the creek, and then went on over the long, easy slope which ran upward to the foot of the distant low mountains, which were known locally as the Ridge.

The coroner pointed out certain features of the terrain and gave rambling explanations of this and of that as they rode along. Flat Top Mountain had been well named, except for the generic term: in some parts of the country it would have been called a hill, although that would have been dignifying the term. The trail to the Ace of Clubs headquarters left the main road at the bridge and forked

to the left.

Three hours after leaving town the two riders, now part of a string of horsemen, neared the ranch houses. The main dwelling was built of sawed lumber, hauled in years back by ox teams, and stood about a hundred yards from the low long bunkhouse, the original home of Tobe Ricketts and his wife. A fenced-in well, driven down through a hummock to keep surface water out of it, stood near the dwelling; a fenced-in spring broke through the ground at the side of the bunkhouse; two corrals, a wagon shed, a blacksmith shop, a hay barn, and a storehouse made up the rest of the headquarters ranch.

A buckboard, a high-bodied carriage, and a score of riding horses were in front of the house. Murphy, the undertaker, was very busy and very hushed, giving the impression to those who knew him well that he was as much afraid of old Tobe dead as he had been of old Tobe living. Each newcomer was grabbed, whispered to, and ushered through the open door, to stay where he had been put. Murphy was pleased by the number of people who came, and believed that it was going to be quite a pleasant occasion.

The stranger followed the coroner inside, in wake of Murphy, who had saved the best seats for his official friends. These were located within two feet of the oak casket and were so placed that nothing could be seen, except by effort, but the newly shaved face of the dead. Had it been a prize fight, Murphy's judgment would have been excellent; but under the conditions, neither the coroner nor his companion was at all enthusiastic.

"Damned fool!" breathed the coroner, squirming and glancing around. He had to twist his neck painfully to see the slowly filling chairs where the common people whispered and creaked and rustled and coughed, and generally had a fair time. The grins which caught the coroner's apologetic eyes were not soothing, and he had arisen to his feet, one hand on his chair and the other pressing the stranger's shoulder in an unspoken signal, when the undertaker, bustling into sight, looked, gasped, and swiftly raised an admonitory hand.

"Stay where you are!" whistled the sibilant whisper, accompanied by a strangled snickering from the common people. "Set down!"

The stranger calmly arose, took his chair, and led the way to a more distant and democratic position, his cold eyes fastened on the sparkling blue ones of Murphy. The coroner seated himself comfortably, gently brushed some dust from a knee, and turned to whisper to his companion; but quickly hushed and stiffened with respect and deference.

Mrs. Tobe Ricketts, now and henceforth Mrs. Jane Ricketts, was coming slowly

into the room on the arm of a friend. She was bent and tiny, her seamed and kindly face a little blank from the shock of the sudden news, from mental groping and uncertainty, from the instant press of suddenly changed conditions. She seemed to be almost dazed, a pitiable figure in shiny black cotton, strongly scented with that odour common to cottons.

Her step wavered, and she slightly lost her balance, and her thin arm moved out to let her thin and heavily veiled hand rest for a moment on the nearest shoulder. She tried to smile an apology, which really was an appeal; and passed on toward the chair which was strongly gripped by Mr. Murphy.

The shoulder she had touched and leaned upon belonged to the stranger; and back of the set coldness of his face there occurred a metamorphosis: in his mind's eye flashed the picture, not yet dimmed by time, of another such scene, where he had been the only honest mourner. The odour of the new cotton dress brought a tightness to his throat: as long as he could remember his mother had moved about in such a scent. He still felt the appeal in that forced smile of apology; he could sense the helplessness, the panic, the uncertainty in the heart of that bent old woman; and the young man, to whom Hopalong Cassidy had constantly preached the doctrine of coldness, felt himself warm and thrill. He arose without a word, turned, passed swiftly along the front row of chairs and out into the open. He was almost running when he reached his horse, and had not settled firmly in the saddle before he was riding back toward town The sheriff had gone to Franklin! Damn the sheriff!

He passed through Desert Wells, almost deserted by the exit of the curious in the other direction, without stopping, and loped along the bench road toward the trail to Franklin. Reaching this, he followed it to the scene of the murder, and there took another good look at the telltale horseshoe track, the track with the missing caulk. By now it was photographed in his memory. Then he knelt to study, one by one, the tracks of the murderer's boots. Finding the best impression, he gave it his whole mind. It was not much later when he arose, mounted, and struck straight north, on a course at right angles to the main trail.

He knew that the killer had headed toward Franklin. He might even have gone there in an effort to lose his horse's tracks among the many on the street of that town. Had he become aware of that broken caulk he would be even more wary: he would go to Franklin and have a new shoe put on. If he was really wise, he would have a new set of shoes put on. But no matter for what reason he went to Franklin, if he did go there, the murderer came from the great basin in which lay the Lazy S, and he would return whence he came.

The stranger had been riding about two hours, it seemed, when he espied the

tracks of a shod horse leading eastward, in the general direction of Desert Wells. There was no sign of a broken caulk in the imprint of the near front foot; but it fairly screamed that the shoe was new. The other three imprints were of old, worn shoes, and they matched, so far as he could remember, those back behind the greasewood clump.

The tracks were not very old and were easy to follow; and follow them he did. Soon he came to an interesting phase of this trail: the horse had turned, stopped, and went on again after a moment. The time of the stop was suggested by the prancing the animal had done. On again, mile followed mile across the desert floor, the tracks at times fading out and then reappearing.

Again there occurred that side turn and stop, and this time it was on the crest of a gentle ridge, where the backward view would take in more country and be less obstructed. He had seen signs that led him to believe that the tracks had been made after dark: in the bottoms of cut-bank storm gullies, where the light from the first-quarter moon had been absent, there were weavings and uncertainties in the course of the trail. This fitted in well enough with the rest of the murder facts. Unmistakable signs of this were found when the low mountain range was crossed, and the uncertainty and lack of directness occurred only where the moonlight could not have penetrated.

The trailer now did something which was not due to lack of courage but to the keen interest which he was taking in his work, to the pride and artistry in it which an expert would naturally show. He abruptly left the trail and swung off to the right, heading as directly as possible for the wagon road leading into town, over which he had set out.

Those stoppings of the tracks bespoke a man who took the trouble to look back over his trail, of a man who expected or feared that someone might be following him. Perhaps, if his conscience was guilty, he would not only do it again, but he might even hole up and wait for several hours to stop such a following horseman.

One of the requisites of successful tracking is to overtake the hunted, and the best method of accomplishing this, whenever practical, is to anticipate the general course of the track maker, cut across chords of his arcs, and to make better time than he makes. On such ground as the stranger had been covering, following the trail track by track would take far more time than was used by the maker. When the stranger emerged from the low mountain ridge, the first thing which struck his eye was Flat Top Mountain; and on the bench at the foot of that was the headquarters of the Ace of Clubs. He had seen an Ace of Clubs horse at the tie-rack outside of Parsons's Saloon, and the brand, in a mind as suspicious as his, spoke volumes. Therefore, following the road and having good going all the

way, he would make as good time to his objective and arouse less suspicion than if he stuck to the trail he had been following. He knew that he could not overtake the maker of the tracks, but he could cheat the maker of the sight of him following along the tracks.

When he neared Desert Wells again he turned off and rode around the town, got back on the trail again and pushed along at a more rapid pace. The morbidly curious had had more than time enough to return from the Lazy S, and he met no one. Crossing the log bridge, he came to the trail pointed out by the coroner and followed it over the gently rising ground at a more sedate pace. A tired-out horse is no asset to its rider, and a man looking for a job seldom rode at speed.

It was almost dusk when he stopped before the shack that served as the Ace of Clubs headquarters, and standing in the door was Pecos Sam, the low-hung sun shining into eyes which would have felt far better in the dark. Sam had imbibed too freely the night before, and had taken sundry doses of the hair of the dog in hopes of curing the bite. His face wore a scowl.

"Hello, Pecos—didn't see you at th' funeral," said the stranger as he swung down from the saddle.

"Hello! Didn't go," growled Pecos. "What you want?"

"Nothin' very much—only a job, punchin' yore cattle," answered the stranger, loafing up to the door.

"Job? Punchin' for us?" questioned Pecos, blinking a little. He fairly blocked the open door. "Damn that sun! Come round in th' shade," he said, urging his visitor before him to stand around the corner of the house.

"Yeah, thought mebby I could get a job," replied the stranger, noticing that the back door was closed. "I'm kinda lookin' this country over, seein' as how I'm figgerin' on stayin' here. If I stay I got to find somethin' to do. This wild kind of country is *my* kind. You need a hand?"

"Hell, no; we ain't got cows enough," answered Pecos. "Why, we hire out whenever we can. Who all was at th' funeral?"

"Well, now, yo're shore askin' me somethin'," said the stranger, grinning. "There was quite a bunch, but I only knowed a few. Parsons, th' coroner, that Box O feller—all them that were in th' saloon last night, nearly. Well, all right. If you ain't got a job, there ain't no use of me wastin' time. I'll water my cayuse, take a drink for myself, an' head back to town."

"There's th' trough," said Pecos, pointing to the corner of the flimsy little corral. "Sheriff at th' funeral?"

"No; reckon he didn't get back from Franklin in time."

"Huh! You figger he should 'a' gone to Franklin?"

"I figger he should 'a' gone any damn place where them tracks went," answered the stranger. "That's what tracks are for, ain't it?"

"Seems so."

"But th' sheriff's wastin' time, Pecos. He'll never get that feller. Purty near everybody in this whole country hated Tobe Ricketts, an' Haskins ain't got a chance. It ain't like just one or two hated him."

"Haskins is a good man," said Pecos, stating something which he did not believe.

"Well, he ain't good enough for that; nobody is." The stranger turned. "Wait till I get my cayuse," he said, and departed, and in a moment he saw that the front door was now closed. Coming into sight again with the animal, he led it to the trough and looked idly about while it drank.

"What you diggin' for—gold?" he inquired with a grin as he looked at an excavation in the side of the hill just behind the corral.

"Naw; aimin' to build a kinda dugout stable for our winter ridin' stock."

The stranger dropped the reins and started toward the scene of the digging.

"That ain't th' way to do it, Pecos," he said, shaking his head. "You want to—
" But the words were broken off as he tripped and fell, landing with his face almost in a fresh horse track, and for a moment he appeared to be stunned; but, after a few seconds, he slowly got to his knees and arose, wiping dirt from his scratched cheek.

"Damn fool thing to do!" he growled, kicking petulantly at the stone he had tripped against.

"Hurt yoreself?" asked Pecos with a frankly casual interest.

"No," grunted the stranger, dusting himself off; but some of it was moist earth and would not come off. He rubbed the heel of his hand, little pellets of dirt rolling out from under his thumb.

"Yo're not diggin' that right, Pecos, as I was sayin'. You want to prop up th' roof as you go, or she'll cave."

"Reckon so?" inquired Pecos sarcastically. "Huh! Th' only thing that would make that roof cave in is dynamite. If you swung th' pick under it, you'd know better."

"Well, all right; I was only suggestin'," said the stranger, turning to go back to his horse. He glanced at the place where he had tripped, and was a little deliberate when he crossed it. Reaching the trough, he leaned over, put his mouth

to the end of the pipe which supplied it, drank moderately, and blew out his breath. "Well, so long. See you in town to-night, mebby?"

"Nope, not to-night," replied Pecos, leading the way to the trail.

"All alone?" asked the stranger, swinging into the saddle.

"Yep," answered Pecos, his back against the door, his elbows touching the frame.

The stranger waved carelessly and rode along the trail toward town; but when he had ridden a mile from the Ace of Clubs headquarters, and out of sight of it, he turned from the trail, hid his horse in a bushy draw, and went to the house on foot, figuring to strike it from the hill behind. This he did, and in the fading light could make out the building; but the voices were indistinct. Picking his way carefully down the slope, he chose the harder ground and managed to get within easy hearing distance.

"Aw, hell; yo're too suspicious," said Pecos's voice, rising in irritation. "He was just learnin' th' lay of th' land hereabouts. Figgers to stay awhile, an' he's only a fool kid, at that."

"Yeah? So *he* said," growled a second voice, one unknown to the listener. "You don't have to tell me what he said, neither: I heard it all. How do we know who he is or what he's doin'?"

"Hell!" snorted Pecos in vast disgust. "You don't reckon he knowed that killin' was goin' to happen an' hustled right down into this part of th' country straight to th' body before it was cold, do you? *Do you?*"

"Yo're damn smart, ain't you?" came the query, pitching high in vexation. "No, he didn't know any killin' was goin' to take place; *but*," the voice broke from its intensity, "you never reckoned he might be a Cattle Association man, did you? Never thought of that, *did you?*"

"Damn if you ain't funny!" retorted Pecos. "Here we been for five years an' not bothered; covered our tracks, jumpin' all over th' whole damn cattle country, an' been here for five years; an' *now* yo're figgerin' some Cattlemen's Association 'tective has jumped us! *Hey!* You aimin' to burn that bacon all to hell?"

The stranger slipped away, returned to his horse, and rode on again; and the faint moonlight was showing him the trail before he reached Desert Wells. Eating a belated supper, he drifted into Parsons's Saloon and joined the coroner and his friend the sheriff.

"Where'd you go to this morning'?" asked the first official, with a deal of interest.

"I get fed up on funerals awful easy," answered the stranger; "an' after bein'

put face to face with that corpse I had all I wanted. Soon as th' widow got past me, th' way was open an' I sloped. Been ridin' around, learnin' th' country. Well, Sheriff," he said, smiling at that person, "anythin' new?"

"No," answered the sheriff. He pulled at his moustache, considered something for a moment, and then looked the stranger in the eye. "Frank, here, says you aim to stay around here till I tell you that you can leave. You can go when yo're a mind to."

"Kind of changed my mind about that," said the stranger, digging at his teeth with the third toothpick. "I like this range. Goin' to find me a job an' stick it out till next spring. You figger th' Box O can use another top hand?"

"Huh!" snorted the sheriff, grinning. "Seems like there ain't nothin' but top hands no more. I happen to know that th' Box O are layin' off instead of hirin'. They had two top-hand tumbleweeds punchin' for 'em durin' th' spring round-up, an' now they're on th' trail again."

"Then that makes two outfits that don't want me," mourned the stranger. "I just come back from th' Ace of Clubs. They ain't hirin', neither."

"Ace of Clubs?" said the sheriff in a rising voice. He flashed a quick glance at his brother official and then laughed. "You didn't go out there for a job, did you?"

"Shore; why not?" indignantly retorted the stranger. "When I want a job, I *look* for it. It ain't very often they hunt me up. Pecos Sam is still feelin' th' likker he drank in here last night. I didn't see nobody else. How many are in that outfit?"

"Four," said the coroner, determined to get into the conversation.

"There was another one of 'em in here last night, wasn't there?"

"Yes; Bully Tompkins was here with Pecos," said the sheriff.

"Who are th' other two?"

"Charley Lennox an' his brother, Al."

"Were they in here, too?"

"No, but I saw Al in town just before you rode in with Tobe's carcass," offered the coroner.

"Huh!" muttered the stranger, his eyes suddenly becoming frosty. "Three from four leaves one." He looked closely at the sheriff, leaned forward, and spoke in a voice so low that it barely carried across the gap between the two men.

"Charley Lennox is a tall man, with big feet, which toe in considerable. He's purty straight in th' legs, a plumb, extra fine rifle shot; he rides a black cayuse that sometimes breaks into single-footin'; an' he's lost th' rowel out of his left spur. Day before yesterday he wore corduroy pants. Is that Charley Lennox as you know

him?"

"That's Charley," said the sheriff. "You don't happen to know what religious faith his great, great gran'-father belonged to, do you?" he chuckled.

"If Charley takes after him, he didn't belong to any," laughed the stranger, and then he sobered. "When did th' Lazy S start to go downhill?" he asked. "Don't guess—think close."

The sheriff cogitated as the coroner leaned forward to get his ears an even break.

"Let's see," mused the sheriff, interested in spite of himself. "Summer before last; th' summer before that; th' summer before that, an' this year. That makes one, two, three, four. Four years ago when it was noticed. It might 'a' started th' year before, for all I know. Why?"

"Ah, that's it: why?" asked the stranger. "Four years ago th' drives of th' Lazy S began to fall off. A year before that a forty-cow outfit, with four men to work it, an' with th' Clover Leaf brand, moved into this part of th' country. Give 'em a year to get th' lay of th' land an' start workin'. I've seen both th' Lazy S an' th' Ace of Clubs brands. If that Clover Leaf, or th' Ace of Clubs, can't blossom out of th' Lazy S mark, then I'm a tumblebug. You ever think of that?"

"Some, an' considerable, as well," answered the sheriff. "If we're goin' to do much of this kind of talkin' we better move over to my office. Too many ears an' eyes in here. What you got on yore mind, anyhow?"

"Not in yore office," objected the stranger earnestly. "I don't aim to be hitched up with any sheriff as long as I can hold it off. I got a lot to tell: let's take a little ride." He glanced swiftly at the coroner and back to the sheriff. "You stay here, Sheriff, to kill off suspicion. Me an' Frank will meet on th' bench road, an' he can tell you all about what's on my mind when he comes back. It's somethin' you'll want to know, an' know right quick."

The sheriff nodded and leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and took out his pipe for a quiet, enjoyable smoke. The stranger did likewise, except that his pipe was a sack of tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers. He laughed, and at a facial sign the coroner and sheriff laughed also.

"That story allus struck me as right funny, seein' that I knowed both men," chuckled the stranger. "I can tell you lots of funny tales about that pair of hombres when I've got time."

The coroner yawned, looked at his watch, arose, and stretched.

"Save 'em for some time when I can hear 'em, too," he suggested. "I got some work to do before I turn in for th' night, so I reckon I'll go do it. See you to-morrow.

Good-night."

They lazily watched him go toward the door, and when he was about to step through it, the sheriff's voice arrested him, and he turned inquiringly.

"Frank, you figgerin' on bein' in yore office very long?"

"Well, I'll be busy for about an hour—why?"

"Reckon I'll drop in about then to check up with you on this Tobe crime. That be all right?"

"Shore, that'll be all right," answered the coroner. "In about an hour," and he stepped through the doorway.

The sheriff and his remaining companion talked idly, and at the end of perhaps ten minutes the stranger stood up.

"I'm right sleepy," he confessed. "Reckon I oughta go to bed. You reckon there's any chance of th' Lazy S needin' a top hand?"

"Not none in th' whole, wide world," chuckled the sheriff; "but you might as well ride out there, an' learn th' sad truth for yoreself."

"I'll do that, right after breakfast. Well, good-night."

"Good-night, stranger," grunted the sheriff, and puffed contentedly on his pipe.

The stranger went to the hotel, around it to the stable, and led out his horse. Saddling hurriedly, he led it away, mounted and rode carelessly toward the ridge road. He had not gone far along the latter when a horseman pushed up out of a gully below the thoroughfare and joined him.

"Well, what's on yore mind?" asked the coroner.

"Did th' sheriff find out anythin' in Franklin?" asked the stranger.

"Nothin' that he said anythin' about," answered the coroner. "He follered th' tracks of a broken hoss-shoe almost into town, an' lost 'em in th' heavier travel."

"They went into Franklin, but they didn't come out again," said the stranger. "I reckon that hoss-shoe can be found in th' blacksmith shop. Th' killer had a brand-new shoe put on in Franklin—*one* new shoe. It was like swappin' a rattlesnake for a copperhead, but th' fool didn't realize it. He rode back home north of th' reg'lar trail. I know where he is, an' I know his name; an' if th' sheriff will do what I did, he can collect enough proof for a first-class hangin'. I don't want to be connected up with it. I'm goin' to have troubles enough of my own without bein' blamed for trackin' down Tobe's murderer. There's only one thing I haven't found out or tried to find out: th' reason why Tobe was killed. There must have been one. Th' sheriff, knowin' everybody in these parts, should be able to learn that without much

trouble, once he gets his man behind bars."

"Stranger, just *how* are you interested in this mess, an' *who* are you?" asked the coroner with deep curiosity, thinking in terms of the great Cattlemen's Association.

"You can call me Mesquite," replied the stranger. "If you or th' sheriff want to know anythin' about me, an' have reasons for it, I can give you th' name of a sheriff up in Montana who can tell you. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, but you might believe him. Now, then: you say th' Lazy S has been slippin', an' you reckon that old woman is headed for th' poorhouse, to live on charity. I'm tellin' you that she ain't headed for there a-tall. Not if I can get me a job of punchin' on her ranch, she ain't. There's a lot of pole cats under this particular pile of brush, but if I'm let, I'll smoke 'em out, an' mebby it'll be with powder smoke. There's a lot of things I want to know, an' I reckon I'll have to prove myself to you an' th' sheriff if I get any help from you fellers. You or th' sheriff write to Hopalong Cassidy, Twin River, Montana. He's sheriff now, Buck Peters havin' quit th' job in favour of a better man. You ask him what you want to know about Mesquite Jenkins. I'll write a note to go with yore letter, tellin' him that it's all right for him to answer. Will you do it?"

"Right quick," answered the coroner. "Anythin' else you want me to tell th' sheriff?"

"Yes," answered Mesquite, and he told the coroner everything he had observed and heard and the conclusions he had drawn. He reached into his pocket and took out the second empty shell, the one he had scooped up from the desert, the one which had killed Tobe's horse.

"Give this to the sheriff, if he wants it," he said. "It's marked with three X's. Which way are you ridin' now?"

"Seein' that I know this section much better than you do, I'll circle around an' come into town another way. You strike right back th' way you came. Jenkins, you—"

"Don't call me that!" snapped Mesquite. "Family names can be traced too easy. Anybody might be called Mesquite. You call me that."

"Mesquite," said the coroner simply. "I like yore ways. After I hear from that Montana sheriff I'll mebby like 'em a whole lot better. If you can clear up that mess out at th' Lazy S, every decent man in this country will be yore friend. Shake!"

"Thanks. Good-night," said Mesquite, shaking hands. Then he whirled his horse and rode back the way he had come.

CHAPTER 4 - THE SHERIFF MOVES

When Mesquite went down to his breakfast the following morning he found the coroner waiting for him.

"Mornin'," said the visitor with a smile. "Thought I'd eat with you."

Mesquite nodded and waved toward a chair, and as they seated themselves two travelling men entered the room and headed straight for the table. They monopolized the conversation, and their presence checked the coroner's purpose; but after the meal was finished the official led his companion out into the street and toward his own little shack, which was both office and home. He cleared a chair of old magazines, papers, reports, and other junk, and waved Mesquite to it.

"Well," he said, smiling grimly. "Things are movin'. I told John everythin' you told me. He had a man riding to Franklin half an hour after he left me, last night. Wanted him to get there early, find out about that hoss-shoe, an' then head straight for a place a little this side of th' Ace of Clubs headquarters. John, himself, is now ridin' over that track. He won't turn off, like you did, but will follow it every step of th' way to wherever it stops."

"It stops at th' Ace of Clubs, at their corral gate," said Mesquite positively.

"Yes, of course," acquiesced the coroner; "but John wants to be able to testify to an unbroken chain of evidence. An', by th' way; we just wired to that Montana sheriff about you. Th' deputy is to send it from Franklin. Havin' your permission to make inquiries, we went right ahead. You see," he explained, with a friendly smile and no embarrassment, "we think right kindly of Jane Ricketts. Yo're a stranger. You act sudden. Mebby you can pull th' Lazy S around an' make a real ranch of it; but we want to know somethin' about you. That's fair, ain't it?"

"Yes," said Mesquite.

"Good. Now, you spoke about th' reason for that murder," continued the coroner. "Tobe Ricketts was dead set against th' Ace of Clubs. He claimed that they was stealin' his cattle an' changing his brand; but he was no friend of th' sheriff's, but quite th' other way, an' he was too proud an' bull-headed to ask for help, or admit that he needed it. He said that he could handle his own troubles himself; an' so he could have, if he had an outfit that was worth a damn. I don't know, of course, what happened on th' Lazy S; but if he was dependin' on his punchers to get proof of stealin' against th' Ace of Clubs, then he didn't have a chance. Tobe had made threats against th' Ace of Clubs. There was plumb bad feelin' between 'em. Nobody knows what he might 'a' said or done. Anyhow, out in this country no jury will need definite proof of any motive when they learn th'

rest of th' evidence. If them two ca'tridge shells are proved to have been fired out of th' rifle of Charley Lennox, that will be enough, when coupled to th' rest of th' proof."

The coroner nodded.

"Th' motive is th' only thing unproved, so far," he said.

"Young man," said the coroner, with budding enthusiasm, "however did you get to be so expert at readin' sign? Damned if you ain't an Injun!"

Mesquite explained briefly and then turned to the matter uppermost in his thoughts.

"About me goin' out to th' Lazy S," he said slowly, looking steadily into the eyes of his companion. "You reckon I better wait till you get th' answer to that telegram?"

"What do you think about it?" asked the coroner.

"What does th' sheriff think about it?"

"He's kinda puttin' that up to you, I reckon."

"Then I'll wait. A day or two won't make much difference; but you mebby oughta ride out there an' tell Mrs. Ricketts to sit tight for a few days; to stay on th' ranch an' wait."

The coroner nodded.

"I'll do it. Jane has a lot of confidence in me, I reckon; an' now that Tobe's dead she'll be able to show some of it." He cleared his throat and studied the unemotional face before him. "Why are you takin' so much interest in somebody that you don't know?"

"I don't know that I can tell you so you'll understand it," slowly replied Mesquite, his expression unchanged. "I like excitement. I lost my mother last year. She looked quite some like Mrs. Ricketts. Sooner or later I've got to find a job. It sorta looked to me like th' job was right here, under my nose. If it is, it won't be no common puncher job; an' mebby I'll be foreman of that ranch before I get through, if I deserve it. I aim to deserve it. For a feller of my age to be foreman of a good ranch—an' it's *goin'* to be a good ranch—ain't very common. Besides, I've been livin' with fellers that hate a thief like they hate a snake, an' I got kinda turned against cattle thieves an' murderers."

"I can believe what you said about th' fellers you lived with," said the coroner, a grin slipping over his face. "I never met any of that crowd, but I've shore heard lots about it. If Hopalong Cassidy says you are all right, me an' John will back you to th' limit. But," he said, the grin fading, "mebby you ain't got any idea of th' trouble that'll head yore way if you start workin' on th' Lazy S."

The cold eyes frosted, the facial muscles hardened, and the coroner felt a little shiver play along his spine.

"Mebby you ain't got no idea," said Mesquite very slowly, "just how *much* trouble there's goin' to be. I have, because I'm figgerin' on makin' most of it myself."

"Well," said the coroner, a little uncomfortably, trying to read the icy eyes, "this is a law-abidin' community— reasonable law-abidin'. Th' law of self-defense an' an even break ain't been covered up with a lot of legal trimmin's. We have been known, out here, to impanel a jury on hossback, an' try a man while all hands were ridin along a trail. If yo're fair an' square, you won't have to worry about *that* end of it."

"Th' main thing, I reckon," said Mesquite, "is to clean up th' range of rustlin' skunks an' ambushers." He cogitated, and a weak smile for an instant broke through the set expression on his face. "I was a deputy, once," he admitted a little apologetically. "Cleanin' up a range ain't very new to me."

"*That's it!*" exclaimed the coroner, a light breaking upon him. "That's it! Let John swear you in an' do things accordin' to law!"

Mesquite's mind raced back to the scene of another swearing in, of the objections he had made about taking prisoners, and of the reassuring replies. The answers to his former objections should hold good down in this country. He nodded, his eyes frosting again.

"Providin' that nobody knows it, for awhile, but me an' you an' th' sheriff," he said. "I once heard a feller say that he didn't want no flags flyin' an' drums beatin' when he went to war. I think a lot of that man's good sense; you'd be surprised if you knew how much."

There was a silence, and it lasted for quite some time, each man busy with his thoughts. Hoof beats drew near and passed. The riders were three, and they were closely grouped. The coroner, glancing up as they rode past, leaned suddenly forward in his chair.

"Three deputies," he explained, his voice tense. "From th' looks of 'em I'd say things are movin'. The sheriff is sendin' 'em ahead of him, to be near the Ace of Clubs when he gets there himself."

"That's what a man gets for bein' too stingy, or careless, to buy four new shoes instead of one," replied Mesquite. Then he looked at his companion. "Don't you an' th' sheriff forget to leave me out of this whole thing! Th' sheriff can take th' credit."

"Well, you'll have to swear to findin' th' body, an th' lay of th' land," replied the

coroner.

"I'll tell anythin' that everybody knows that I know; an' nothin' else," said Mesquite. "Remember what I said about flags flyin' an' drums beatin'?"

"We'll fly th' flags an' beat th' drums," said the coroner.

"What's yore name?" asked Mesquite. "I ain't heard it, yet."

"That so? Corbin—Frank Corbin. Call me Frank."

"All right, Frank. How soon you figger th' answer will come from Montana?"

"All depends on how quick that sheriff acts."

Mesquite chuckled and his eyes warmed a little.

"It all depends on how soon it gets to him from th' railroad office. Th' operator is a good friend of his. It won't be long, then."

"Couple of days, mebby," guessed the coroner. "How you goin' to kill time? There's mostly a poker game goin' on in Parsons'."

"Poker ain't lurin' me none right now. I'll find ways to pass th' time. I've got to know somethin' about this range before I can do anythin'."

Corbin laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"Strikes me you've done considerable already," he said.

"I was talkin' about my own job. Suppose you tell me th' lay of th' country, th' trails an' roads out; th' ranges, cricks, an' th' people. Th' hist'ry of th' Lazy S an' its present outfit would be right interestin'."

"All right; we've got plenty of time, an' we'll need it," said Corbin. "Shuck yore coat an' get ready for a lot of talk. If it comes too fast or you get confused, say so."

The sheriff was as keen on his present work as a hound on a scent. He had sent a deputy to Franklin, a man who had the knack of worming things out of people. The deputy dropped into the blacksmith shop about one minute after the smith had unlocked the door.

"Hello, Jim!" said the smith. "When did you get in town?"

"This mornin', Jake. I reckon mebby I got a cracked caulk. Take a look at 'em, will you?"

"Well, I'll be damned," said the smith. "What kind of blacksmith you got over there in Desert Wells? You tell Hogan he better learn his trade."

"That so?" inquired the deputy, bridling a little. "Hogan's th' best blacksmith for five hundred miles around."

"Yeah? Like hell he is! Two Desert Wells fellers in two days drop in here with busted caulks. Yes, he is!"

"Two days, huh?" said the deputy suspiciously. "What you think I am?"

"Well, three days, then; what's th' difference?"

"I don't care nothin' about how many days it is, except to bust up yore conceit," retorted the deputy. "But I shore am questionin' yore statement that we both came from Desert Wells. Hogan never made that other feller's shoes."

"Didn't, huh? Then where does that Lennox feller go to have his hoss-shoes made—Washington, D. C.?"

"I don't know where Al goes if he don't go to Hogan," confessed the deputy.

"Neither do I, but Charley goes to Hogan, don't he?"

"Reckon so. Was it Charley?" asked the deputy. "He's th' Lennox brother that's allus in a hurry, ain't he?"

"Well, it was Charley; an' he was travellin' true to form."

The smith had his apron on by now and was clawing coals into the maw of a roaring blaze with one hand while he pumped the bellows with the other. The fire going to suit him, he went over to the deputy's horse and lifted one foot after another. Then he lifted them all again, and stood up, looking inquiringly at his companion.

"What foot did you say that cracked caulk was on?"

"Near hind," answered the deputy, moving forward. "Can't you find it?"

"No, I can't find it! An' the reason I can't find it is because there ain't no such thing. You loco?"

"Well, Jake," said the deputy, grinning. "You've told me so much that you shore can't plead ignorance. What did you do with that busted shoe off Charley Lennox's hoss?"

"What you mean?" asked the smith, arms akimbo.

"I mean that my boss, Sheriff Haskins, wants that busted shoe."

"Damn it, I oughta knowed that you was up to somethin'," snorted the smith, but a grin was stealing over his face. "What's Charley gone an' done now—stole a cow or two?"

"Charley is plumb suspected of shootin' old Tobe Ricketts in th' back. Tobe died. Somebody shot him through th' back an' let him crawl, bleedin' to death, after his hoss. Then th' feller shot th' hoss, an' left th' old man to die out on th' desert. I wouldn't tell you, only I know you."

"Th' filthy rat!" snapped the smith, almost jumping toward the pile of iron miscellany on the far side of his anvil. "By Gawd! I come awful near workin' that shoe into somethin' else—but I didn't. Here it is. Put it around his neck when you

stretch it!"

"I knowed you'd help kill vermin," said the deputy, taking the shoe. "Now, mebby you'll step around th' corner a minute. I've seen th' Justice, an' he's waitin' to swear to yore signature. Got th' thing all written out, except a couple of places you've got to tell us about."

"I ain't signin' no paper!" cried the smith, his face growing red. "I signed a paper once, an' it took me three years to get back out of debt!"

"I reckon you'll be safe if you sign somethin' for th' Justice of th' Peace of yore own town. Anyhow, you can read it over, first."

"I'd rather have it read to me: my ears are smarter than my eyes," replied the smith, untying his apron. "I busted my glasses an' can't hardly see nothin'."

"But you could see there wasn't no crack in them caulks," said the deputy, enjoying himself. He knew that the smith could not read.

"Hell, that was part of my *business*, warn't it? A feller allus oughta be good at his own business, hadn't he? Come on: I'll sign anythin' th' Justice tells me to."

"This is just for our own information, Jake," said the deputy, leading the way out of the shop. "We'll tell you when you'll have to come over to court."

And thus was another link added to the chain of evidence.

The sheriff was as busy as a two-legged, two-armed man can be, following doggedly along two sets of tracks, which made his work a little easier. He had taken Mesquite's tip and was now going over the same ground. The second and newer set was the easier to trail, for it seemed that its maker had deliberately sought to make his mount's footprints plain. This was Mesquite's trail, made plain purposely to aid the sheriff. The sheriff moved much more swiftly, therefore, than had his last predecessor on that trail; and he sighed with regret when he had crossed the mountain ridge, and came to the place where that second set of prints turned off and headed for town. From here on his progress was jerky. There were stretches of hard ground, and then stretches of soft; but on most of the hard ground were pebbles half buried, and many of these had been torn loose by the shoes of the killer's horse. The sheriff's only concern was to establish the connection between these tracks and the man who had made them—to forge a strong link to be used as evidence.

Time passed. The sun had moved over its meridian point when the sheriff at last, sighing with relief over one task finished, drew a deep breath preparatory to beginning a new task, and one more dangerous and exciting. He dismounted, led his horse into a thicket, tied it to a small tree, and slipped on foot toward the headquarters of the Ace of Clubs. This was their ranch house, their only dwelling.

The deputies he had sent out from town should all have taken up their position. Halfway there he was hailed in a whisper and joined by the deputy he had sent to Franklin.

"Just got here," said the deputy. "Not ten minutes ago."

"Find out anythin'?"

"All we wanted to find out. Here's th' busted shoe an' an affidavit from Jake."

"Fine! Good work!" whispered the sheriff. "Keep to cover, round back. You come up behind th' corral, an' if you can get down th' hill without bein' seen, do so. If you can't, then lay low up there with yore rifle ready. Things may happen mighty swift after they start."

"I'll be there," promised the deputy, disappearing.

The sheriff went on, crouched, gun in hand. As he stepped into the open, not far from the shack, his appearance seemed to be a signal, for his deputies, with drawn guns, burst from cover on the far side and sprinted for the house. They made pairs, with the sheriff, two at the front door and two at the rear; and they simultaneously entered the building.

They burst in on Pecos Sam, Mesquite's "standing drinker" of Parsons's Saloon, who was very much surprised for a man who had seen the start of the sprints; but, like many actors, he overacted. The potatoes spilled and went one way; the knife went another, and Sam's hand was pressed over his heart. He forgot that he had earned the reputation for being a very hard, cold customer.

The bunks were empty. There was no place of concealment in the house, yet the sheriff's men went through the ritual of search. They developed no hiding place.

The sheriff himself moved to the gun pegs and took down a Winchester repeating rifle. It was a .45-70. He went to the door, pumped a cartridge into the barrel, and fired into the ground. The shell disappointed him and he tossed it away.

"Where are th' rest of yore outfit?" he asked, peering closely at the still flustered cook.

"Out on th' range, I reckon. Why?"

"Where's Bully Tompkins? When did he leave here?" persisted the sheriff.

"I dunno where he is," answered Pecos. "He left right after breakfast an' he's been gone ever since."

"Does he generally do that?"

"Shore. He takes a snack with him."

"Where's Al?"

"Out on th' range some'r's. He done just like Bull," explained Pecos.

"Well, where's Charley?" persisted the sheriff, his eyes not once having left Pecos's face.

"Dunno. He's like th' other two. What's th' trouble? What's up, Sheriff?"

The sheriff ignored the question and waved to his men.

"Two of you take him outside, away from th' house," he ordered. "If he makes a break for it, drop him."

In a moment the sheriff and the other two deputies had the room to themselves.

"Look for th' re-loadin' outfit an' th' empty shells," said the peace officer, and he led the search. It was not a difficult matter, for the single room had no hiding places. One of the deputies, clearing a pile of papers and other things from a shelf, pulled down a box and with his other hand pulled down another.

"Here it is," he said, and gave it to his superior.

The sheriff dumped the box of empty shells on the table, first being certain that Pecos could not see him through the window. He spread them about and examined them one by one. In a few moments he pushed several to one side and put the rest back in the box.

"Put these boxes back just like you found 'em, an' put that junk back on top of 'em," he ordered. "Hank, you come here an' scratch yore initials on these shells, on th' side, so you'll be able to swear that you marked them, that you found them in this house and on this date."

Hank complied, and as he stepped back, the sheriff compared each shell with one he took from his pocket, nodded grimly, and pocketed them all.

"When we catch him, he'll be tried an' hung," he said, and strode for the door.

His men complied with his energetic gesture, and soon Pecos Sam was in the house again, his back in a corner.

"Pecos!" snapped the officer, "I'm goin' to ask you some questions. If you know what's good for you, you'll tell me th' truth. Shut up! I ain't asked you nothin' yet! Now, you lissen: are all three of yore friends comin' back to this shack as usual, to-night?"

"Why, I reckon so," answered Pecos, mildly surprised. "They allus do."

"Keep yore eyes right on mine! An' you tell th' truth. When is Bully Tompkins comin' back here?" The sheriff took a step forward, his arm upraised. "Look at me! Look me right in th' eyes! When is Bully Tompkins comin' back here?"

"I dunno, Sheriff; I dunno. I reckon he'll be back for supper."

"When is Al comin' back?"

"I dunno, but he oughta be back before dark."

"When is Charley comin' back? Look at me, I tell you! When is Charley comin' back?"

Pecos looked calmly into the pale blue eyes.

"I don't know any more about him than I do about th' others. I reckon they all will drop in around supper time. If they don't, they can cook their own. What's th' matter, anyhow?"

"Put th' irons on him, boys," ordered the sheriff, "an' two of you take him to town. Th' other two stay here with me, but somethin' tells me that we're too late."

He shifted his head a little, away from Pecos; but not so far that he missed the flitting expression of satisfaction and exultation on the man's face. Pecos was now certain that his friend had escaped. So far as he himself was concerned, he knew that they had nothing on him; let them try to frighten him from now on! He chuckled. If everything was all right, he was to build a fire on the top of the hill, out back. He did not have to make an effort to do his signalling, for no signal was a signal.

The two deputies stepped up to Pecos, handcuffed him and started toward the door; but one of them, obeying the sheriff's gesture, went back to the peace officer's side.

"Turn him loose when you get him near to town," whispered the sheriff. "We'll look for tracks, though I don't reckon it'll do much good."

When the sheriff and the two other deputies were alone he led them from the house and signalled the man on the top of the hill to come down. They searched for tracks and found none that meant anything: the fugitive had been wise enough to take another horse, whose unknown prints were lost among the number of tracks on the hard-packed trail. When the black horse was rounded up, it was found to be unshod, no hard matter where tools were at hand for the work.

On the way to town they met Pecos Sam returning. He grinned sarcastically and rode past with his sombrero cocked at an angle which he considered to be insulting.

CHAPTER 5 - THE BADGE OF THE LAW

Mesquite spent the next two days in the saddle and the intervening night in a camp of his own. He chose for the scene of his activity the eastern end of the great basin, beyond the range of the Lazy S and even beyond that of the Ace of Clubs. The two low mountain ridges which roughly bounded the basin on the north and south, although they slanted well off the true course, here drew a little closer together and then flattened out into a high, connecting tableland.

The slope up to the top of this tableland was wild and rocky, cut with arroyos and small cañons, gouged by rainwater gullies, dotted with little hills and pitted with small valleys, some of which were blessed by springs, which made several of them exceedingly rich in grass. The general aspect was one of scraggly bush, its nature varying with the soil, the aridity, and the altitude. Vision was limited except from the tops of the larger hills.

There were cattle in this broken country, but most of them were old and worthless; tough cows barren because of age; old steers, whose stringy meat would daunt even the best of teeth; mean old bulls, range scrubs, that should have been killed off as found and not left to keep an inferior cattle strain alive in the herds below. Their self-banishment was a good thing for the whole range, although at times they went down into the valley.

These outlaws of all kinds were mostly branded; and of really marketable animals Mesquite saw but few, so few that their numbers did not count. These were the facts, and he was gleaning facts, hoping from them to build up a chain of logic from which to draw knowledge, a knowledge that would aid him in the problems he would have to solve. Some of the facts he learned were so significant to his mind that already a working hypothesis was shaping itself.

Why were there practically no valuable cattle in so wild a country, especially when it was generally known that the outfit of the Lazy S, over a period of four years, had been careless and without real interest in its work? Why were there not numbers of Lazy S cattle up in this wild country, cattle of all ages, cattle of the three classes? It seemed as though carelessness on one hand might be offset by carefulness on the other. If the Lazy S was careless, then who was careful? Who gleaned the strays?

What horse tracks he found were so old or obliterated or faint that they told him nothing, except that horses had been in this wild country, shod horses; and here and there the tracks passed around low-hung branches of the higher trees, suggesting a reason for it. Nowhere at such a place could be found tracks that went under limbs low enough to strike a rider. Few things seen by the eyes have

as little significance as the majority of men attribute to them. Cause and effect, the oldest and most persistent relationship in the world, is perhaps the generally least recognized or understood.

It was late in the afternoon of his first day of riding that he came to a focussing of the faint horse tracks he had been noticing so much. There was a faint semblance of a path, leading roughly in a northerly direction. His interest quickened, and he followed the little trail, one so faint that often it was only by looking well ahead, when he could, that he could keep it in sight. It led him into one of the small valleys, a mere dip in the ground; but spring water oozed down the slope and kept alive a sturdy patch of grass. As he glanced around the rim his attention was caught by something entirely foreign to nature: a long, horizontal line in the brush. There was no need to investigate it: it was wire.

He rode far enough down the slope to get a better look at the softer ground in the little slough; and the pock-marks were those such as might have been made by cattle the year before. The suspicion of gleaning, awakened by negative evidence, was now acquiring that dignity which positive evidence endows. His suspicious mind flashed back over the trail of reasoning, over the facts and into the problematical; did these gleaners pick up only stray cattle, or were the cattle allowed to wander? Were they, perhaps, deliberately drifted into these wilds? The correct answer to this would be worth almost any effort made to obtain it. That would likely come later, and from another place.

Heretofore his riding had been without any especial alertness so far as his own safety was concerned, but now he recognized the need for a change, and his progress was a little more circumspect.

He followed along the trail, now a little heavier, a little wider and, therefore, plainer to the eye. Another small valley, with a swampy bottom, was reached some time later; and he learned of the wire because his horse almost ran into it. It was junk wire, joined and tied, both barbed and plain, and of several sizes. It also was in better continuity than the first he had seen, entirely circling the hollow except where the trail entered. A loose length, coiled roughly, told of a one-strand gate; and also told that a single horseman could pen his stock and be free to search for more.

Neither camping nor branding appeared to have occurred at either of these small valleys; the entire lack of burned spots or charred wood plainly indicating this.

He pushed on again, along an even plainer trail, and found that it was joined, here and there in low places, by that same kind of trail he had found so difficult to follow earlier in the day. And he became conscious of another fact: this larger

trail ran generally upward, through a series of various kinds of depressions. This was curious, for the range of the Ace of Clubs, whose territory he was beginning to approach, lay on much lower ground. He smiled grimly, and then began to look around for a camp spot, for good grazing for his horse. It was nearly dusk before he found one which suited him, and after taking care of his mount and eating a portion of the cold rations he carried, he rolled up in a blanket and went to sleep like a child.

The second day found him again calling upon his own peculiar training: he abandoned this trail and struck from it at right angles. It was as though he regarded it as one spoke, perhaps, to a wheel. It naturally would lead toward the hub; but to follow it might result in being seen, and in arousing suspicions in canny minds entirely too ripe for suspicion. It was a crooked spoke, and its axial line uncertain; but a second spoke would, if followed reasonably far, provide a line of intersection which might indicate the general location of the hub. With the short time at his disposal, approximation would have to suffice.

On his course up the slope of the tableland's benches, he crossed several of those already mentioned faint trails, and they all led downward, and, therefore, toward the trunk line he had quitted; but at last he found one which angled off in the other direction, and he followed it as rapidly as possible. It led him to others, and by noon he reached the main stem and let it be his guide. Finally he came upon fresh horseshoe prints, going in the same direction, and he stopped, dismounted, led his horse from the trail, and climbed to the top of the right-hand hill. For minutes his searching gaze slowly swept the country, gradually acquiring a greater radius; and then it stopped and fixed upon a moving dot, a dot so small that it told him nothing beyond the fact that it was a horseman. A rider, out here, could be no one but one of the gang, and he was heading in the right direction to prove Mesquite's points. Mesquite had obtained his approximation, and by it eliminated nine tenths of the table land and its sloping benches.

Back in the saddle again, he turned and headed for town. He crossed the log bridge west of the Lazy S at twilight, and reached town to find the hotel dining room closed. After a mediocre meal at a lunch room, he drifted into Parsons's Saloon and found the sheriff and his friend the coroner in their accustomed places.

"You found that job yet, Mesquite?" inquired the former, grinning provocatively.

Mesquite shook his head and dropped into a chair.

"Better ask th' sheriff if he's found what he lost!" cried a humorous voice from the rear of the room, where the nightly game of poker was in progress, and a gust

of good-natured laughter proved that the jest was enjoyed.

"He ain't lost; he's just mislaid, an' I'll get him," retorted the sheriff. "He ain't th' first feller that ain't been where my hand landed, an' he won't be th' last. It's somethin' to know who he is."

"If you *do* know," retorted another voice, with just the suggestion of a barb in it. "Seems to me you ain't got much evidence."

"Had enough for th' coroner's jury, as you oughta know, seein' you was on it," replied the peace officer imperturbably.

"Why, any fool would know it was murder," retorted the scoffer; "but as to fixin' it onto somebody, that's different!"

"Yes," said the sheriff reflectively, "that's different." He seemed to become a little doubtful, and changed the subject. "You ain't quittin' yore job, are you, Tommy?" he asked the scoffer, in pretended anxiety.

"Who, me?" quickly asked Tommy. He was very much surprised. "Why?"

"I don't know why. I just asked a plain question."

"Naw, I ain't quittin'. Zeke say anythin'?" asked Tommy, vaguely disturbed, because it was a good job, and good jobs were scarce just then. The Box O had just laid off two men, and he hoped Zeke had no further economies in mind.

"No-o, he didn't say anythin', you might say," drawled the sheriff, and seemed willing to let the subject lie.

"What made you ask me that, then?" demanded Tommy, with more than casual interest.

"I was just thinkin' of somethin', that's all," answered the sheriff.

"There ain't nothin' wrong, is there?" asked Tommy, beginning to squirm.

"I ain't tellin' no perfessional secrets," placidly replied the officer.

"What you mean?" asked Tommy with throbbing curiosity.

"Nothin', I reckon; go on with th' game," said the sheriff, turning his face away to hide its smile; and for the rest of the evening Tommy's lack of interest in poker was noticeable, and his losing streak continued. Thus are the wicked punished by the wise, and retaliation obtained by the subtle. Tommy's scoffing cost him nearly half a month's wages and sent him home to worry for half the remainder of the night.

Mesquite caught the gleam of mirth in the sheriff's eyes and read the satisfaction wreathing the coroner's face. Tommy's unrest supplied what else might be needed to explain the matter, and Mesquite chuckled low in his throat.

The sheriff looked at him, and his lips twitched. This would be a good time to

try out the stranger's wits. The answer to the telegram had come from Montana, and the sheriff cleared his throat.

"These Western states think highly of their good citizens," he remarked reflectively. "From California to Missouri, from Texas to Montana, this is so."

"Yeah!" cried a boisterous, bantering voice from the card table. "Utah swears by Brigham Young, an' Missouri brags about Jesse James. Who've we got to cheer for?"

"Charley Lennox, you jackass!" ejaculated a companion. "He oughta have a medal."

"Come on, come on!" growled a player. "Deal 'em; deal 'em! Don't pay so much attention to Haskins. Put in a chip, an' deal!"

Mesquite's cold face softened a little, and he nodded. He was glad that Hopalong Cassidy's answer had been received. And he was glad to make the acquaintance of a man like the sheriff, and hoped that he might, some day, claim him for a steadfast friend.

"That remark about Utah swearin' reminds me of somethin'," said the sheriff, absently toying with the badge on his vest, "somethin' I figger on doin' to-night."

Mesquite looked at him intently, studying the seamed face, and his own eyes brightened as the sheriff opened his coat wide and revealed a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to its lining.

"But you drew four cards!" came Tommy's indignant wail from the poker table. "Judas priest! Look here: three crowned heads, all male, an' they lose to a four-card draw!"

"Santy Claus just clumb down th' chimbly," placidly remarked the lucky winner, pulling in his gains.

"When I got th' best hand, nobody stays," growled Tommy; "but when I got a real good hand, somebody's got a better!"

"Never mind, Tommy; you come in second, anyhow," consoled a companion.

"That shows we're good players, gettin' out when you've got th' best hand," said the dealer, "except when we scare you out an' rake in on a pair of treys. But no foolin', fellers: that makes three times to-night that a four- or five-card draw has made a flush or better. Me, I'm goin' to bust my little pairs from now on, an' wait for Santy Claus."

"Well," growled a man, arising and pushing his solitary chip to the banker, "mebby yo're goin' to wait for Santy Claus, but I'm goin' out lookin' for him—with a gun. I'm through. Good-night."

"Hey, you fellers," called the dealer. "Hey, Haskins; hey, Corbin! Hey, you Mesquite feller! There's room for another pilgrim."

The coroner looked inquiringly at his official friend, smiled at the shake of the head, and slowly arose.

"Goin' to invest," he apologized to Mesquite, and sauntered to the table. "What's th' game?" he asked as he dug down into a pocket.

"Two bits an' a dollar," answered the dealer. "Look out for Tommy: he holds good hands."

"You go to hell," growled Tommy, grinning ruefully. He turned and glanced curiously at the sheriff and slowly picked up his hand.

The sheriff waited until the game held the attention of the players, and Parsons as well, and leaned a little forward.

"Whichever of us two leaves here first," he whispered, "waits at my office." His hand moved inside his coat and then fell to the arm of his chair.

Mesquite nodded quietly, but his face hardened and frost crept into his eyes. He could wear that badge with far more complacency than he had worn the one that Sheriff Peters had pinned on his vest about two years before.

It was not long before Tommy, of the Box O, pushed back his chair and stood up. His remarks to his friends were not complimentary, but they gave as good as they received. He had no chips to cash, and therefore tarried not; but he stopped at the sheriff's side, and looked down inquiringly.

"What'd you mean 'bout me quittin' my job?" he carelessly asked.

"Ride along home, sonny," replied the sheriff. "You'll mebby find out, some day. Things like that usually get known. Ride along home." He stretched and arose. "I'll ride with you far's th' jail."

Tommy became a little apprehensive, but said nothing. He was swiftly running back in his mind for a clue to the sheriff's words, to find out if this short ride with the sheriff was going to be disastrous. He led the way to the tie rack, mounted in silence, and grudged each step of his horse, but at the combination office and jail the sheriff waved his hand and said good-night. Tommy's sigh of relief reached the officer's ears and sent a grin to the leathery face.

Half an hour later Mesquite walked slowly up the street toward the hotel and saw the sheriff sitting on the single low step before his lighted door. The curtains were tightly drawn. Mesquite angled over and paused.

"Gettin' a mite chilly," said the officer. "If you ain't in no hurry, we might as well go inside an' palaver a bit."

"Oh, well, for a few minutes," acquiesced Mesquite. "I'll smoke a couple of cigarettes while yo're finishin' yore pipe."

The door closed behind them, and when it opened again it let out a new deputy sheriff, whose badge lay inside his vest; and who had been told to ride to the Lazy S after breakfast for the job which there awaited him.

CHAPTER 6 - GETTING ACQUAINTED

Mesquite dismounted at the Lazy S ranch house and knocked. As the door opened to reveal Mrs. Ricketts, he removed his hat and smiled.

"I'm Mesquite," he said.

"Come in. I've been expectin' you."

Her old face beamed and momentarily lost a little of its look of worry and sorrow. She did not have much faith in the salvation of the Lazy S: if her husband's best efforts had availed nothing, then of what avail were those of any other man? But it was pleasant to think that she did not stand alone, that a fresh attempt would be made to save the ranch. The Lazy S was the sum of Tobe's achievements; it was the sum of the lifelong efforts of them both. It was a monument to his work, his pride, and sentiment directed that it should stand.

"I suppose you want me to tell you what I can about th' ranch?" she suggested as they seated themselves.

Mesquite dropped his Stetson on the floor between his feet and slowly shook his head as he looked at her.

"No, ma'am," he answered. "I've been thinkin' it over, ridin' out here this mornin'. All I want to know is th' figgers in th' tally book for th' last six or seven years: th' number of cattle branded, th' number on th' range, an' th' drive figgers. I reckon yore tally books will tell me that."

"But Frank Corbin told me to tell you everythin' I could," protested the widow in some surprise.

"Yes, ma'am; I know he did," replied Mesquite quietly. "I thought that would be a good thing; but I've changed my mind. You see, when you live on a ranch for so many years, you see it too close up; you let things ruin yore judgment, sometimes. I don't want to have my mind made up for me ahead of time; I want to see things for myself. I can't explain it very well, but I shore know what I mean."

"I understand you," replied the widow. She sighed. "Mebby you are right. Mebby you'll see things that we didn't, mebby you'll look at 'em from another direction."

"I reckon I will, ma'am," grimly said Mesquite, his face growing hard again. "I

reckon it's goin' to be quite a fight, puttin' this ranch back where it belongs. Now, it strikes me that if you trust me enough to let me work on th' Lazy S, you might trust me enough not to question what I do. I want to feel that I'm workin' just like I'd work on a ranch of my own. I can't do anythin' if I'm hobbled or pulled back. I've been told this ranch is right sick, an' I reckon I can cure it if I do it in my own way. Mebby my way will be right rough, sometimes; but if it is, that's because it has got to be. Now, if you'll just hire me an' take me down to th' bunkhouse to th' foreman, I'll start. I don't figger to earn my wages for a while; I'll have to find things out before I can do much except ride range like th' rest of th' men."

"I'm payin' th' foreman eighty dollars a month," suggested the owner of the Lazy S.

"That's too much for a poor man, an' not enough for a good one," said Mesquite; "but, considerin' th' size of th' ranch an' th' way it's been handled, it's too much. What you payin' th' men?"

"Forty, but I don't know where it's comin' from after while."

"We'll mebby find th' answer to that along with th' answer to a lot of other things," said Mesquite. "Keep right on with th' payroll as it is. Cuttin' a man's pay is a good way to get rid of him, an' that'll mebby come in handy when th' time comes. I don't need any money for a while; let mine ride. How do you pay th' men: personally, or through th' foreman?"

"Through Rankin—he's foreman," answered the widow. She shook her head emphatically. "Yo're goin' to be paid as long as th' money holds out." Something had been puzzling her, and now she put it in words. "Frank Corbin said you'd take Rankin's place. You been talkin', sort of, like you wanted to be one of th' men."

"Well, that's right nice of Frank, an' you, too," said Mesquite, his expression warming a little; "but I reckon I ought to be one of th' men, until we see how things go. An' as long as Rankin handles th' payroll, he'll have to pay me, or do a lot of thinkin'—an' I don't want him to do no more thinkin' about me than he has to. As it is, he'll be wonderin' why yo're hirin' another man, when you got more than you need, right now."

"No, I don't believe he will," said the widow, smiling suddenly. "One of th' men is goin' to get married, an' set up for himself. You can take his place."

"Settin' up for himself, huh?" mused Mesquite. "I'll be glad to take that man's place. I'm glad he's quittin'. Saved quite some money in five years at forty dollars a month, ain't he?"

"Oh, he hasn't been here that long," said the owner. "Two years, I think. He's th' foreman's brother."

"That's interestin'," commented Mesquite grimly. "Where's he figgerin' on settin' up?"

"Why, he's buyin' into th' Clover Leaf an' goin' over there."

"Ace of Clubs, huh?" growled Mesquite, an unpleasant smile creeping over his face. "That's interestin', too. When's he goin'?"

"Why, he wasn't to go till th' end of th' month, but he's changed his mind an' leavin' to-morrow."

"One from four leaves three, plus one makes four," muttered Mesquite, his eyes growing frosty. "He's goin' to take th' place of th' man that killed yore husband, ma'am."

"What did you say?"

"Mebby I made a mistake, ma'am; but I reckon no harm's been done. I don't figger you'll do much talkin'. Charley Lennox murdered Tobe Ricketts, an' Charley has left for parts unknown. Th' foreman's brother is takin' his place on th' Ace of Clubs to keep that outfit up to four men. An' that's a thing that kinda puzzles me: you'd think any outfit that has four men in it, hirin' out when they can, an' with only two hundred cows, would shore be glad to shrink to three men, an' stay shrunk. Ma'am, this is goin' to be next to th' best job I ever had; but, like th' other one, I'm afraid it'll peter out." He shook his head regretfully. "Ain't it a shame that doin' a job ends it?" He vividly remembered that other job: the tracking down of a round dozen would-be murderers. "Well, they're right interestin' while they last."

"Young man!" snapped the owner of the Lazy S, "I think it's about time that somebody came to this country that can see things from a different point of view. Charley Lennox! Now I know who it was I heard Tobe quarrellin' with! An' Rankin's brother takin' his job with that gang!"

"Yes, ma'am; you might tell th' sheriff all about that," said Mesquite. "He'll be glad to know it, if he don't know it now."

"I'll tell you, first!"

"No, ma'am; please don't," requested Mesquite. "That's part of a different story. I know it ties in with other things, but I don't want nobody else's eyes seein' things for me. Suppose you take me down an' tell Rankin that I'm th' new man." He chuckled grimly. "I'm honin' to see his face when his new man is hired for him: mostly a foreman hires his own men. He won't like that, an' he won't like me; but he won't be th' first man that didn't like me, an' I reckon he won't be th' last."

He picked up his hat and stood up.

"Young man," said the owner with some asperity, "I shouldn't like yore face,

for it's too cold to be human; but, somehow, I do like it. An' I like th' way you talk, an' act, even if it is kinda—kinda blood-thirsty. Once, when I was a little girl, up North, I saw a wolverine. You bring it back to my mind. If there's goin' to be any shootin' around this ranch, I want you to keep it where it belongs—not on this side of th' bunkhouse!"

"Ma'am," said Mesquite, grinning widely, "I said that I was goin' to like th' job. Now I'm sayin' that I'm goin' to like my boss. There won't be no shootin' this side of th' bunkhouse."

She laughed, for the first time in days.

"Come on, then; we'll surprise th' foreman!"

Leading the way, Jane's progress had the purposefulness and determination that might have been shown by the old Crusaders. Her short steps were rapid enough to keep Mesquite just behind her right elbow, and she sailed up to the bunkhouse just as Rankin moved curiously through the door, his level gaze on the stranger, a stranger to his eyes but not to his ears. The foreman's humour was not one that would warmly welcome this newcomer, for he looked upon Mesquite as a pestiferous meddler, who already had made necessary a change of plan; and he was not entirely certain, from what he had heard, that the stranger was only a meddler. The Cattlemen's Association acted in mysterious ways its miracles to perform, and its arm was long and powerful.

"Rankin," said Jane, her words bitten off and her face grim, "here's a man I just hired to take yore brother's place, since he's leavin' us to-morrow. Find him somethin' to do, an' make him earn his salt. His name is Mesquite. Pay him th' same wages yore brother got. Mesquite," she said, turning to her tow, "this is Mr. Rankin, yore new foreman."

"How'd'y, Mr. Rankin," said Mesquite coldly.

"How'd'y!" snapped the foreman, and wheeled to face his employer, his eyes glinting. "Mrs. Ricketts, I don't know that we need another man. I was aimin' to try to get along without one."

"Very well, then," replied Jane decisively, in her mind formulating something strange to her. She hoped she could lie convincingly. "You can discharge somebody, then, an' put Mesquite in his place. He is a friend of my brother, an' I promised that I would hire him."

"That so?" drawled the foreman with thinly veiled contempt, as he turned with insulting slowness to look at the friend of his employer's brother, to look at the man who got his job through family pull. His lips curled and he nodded. "Reckon I can make room for him without firin' nobody till I see how good he is. I never

like to fire a man an' then have to hire him over ag'in."

"All right; do what you think best," said the owner, and whisked about to return to the ranch house.

Both men watched her go and saw her enter the house, and each turned at the same instant and exchanged level looks.

"So, yo're a friend of her brother's, huh?" inquired Rankin, drawling his words. "An' a two-gun man, too! Well, well, well!" He rubbed the stubble on his chin, and his expression hardened. He drew out a big silver watch, glanced at it, and then verified it by the sun. "It won't be long before th' boys ride in for dinner. I'll show you yore bunk, an' you can loaf around till then."

Mesquite followed the foreman into the house, carrying his blanket roll with its meagre supply of extra clothing. In a few moments he turned from the bunk and started toward the door, to find the foreman blocking the way.

"We don't need no extra man," said Rankin, his eyes glinting. "If we did, *I'd* hire him, myself. If you don't find things pleasant round here, you can allus move on. Far's I'm concerned, I don't care; but th' boys are right sudden in their likes an' dislikes; an' they might not like th' boss's relations pickin' out their bunk mates."

"No more than I like a foreman who lets his men pick his fights for him," replied Mesquite coldly.

Rankin flushed, his eyes snapping with anger.

"What you mean by that?" he demanded ominously.

"No man with brains would have to ask that question," retorted Mesquite. "Now, if yo're lookin' for somebody to pick on, you'll be safer if you hunt for a cripple."

The foreman's right hand dropped swiftly, but a straight left is a mighty swift movement, and a disconcerting one to a man who expects a gun play. Rankin's balance was disturbed, his head snapped back and his hand missed the walnut; and as his head came forward again, his chin was met by a timed right-hand blow that drove him against the wall before he dropped. A fair referee could have counted fifty before the foreman stirred. Then one leg drew up, an arm moved; and then the fallen man squirmed as he slowly recovered consciousness. He pushed himself up to a sitting position and slowly looked around the room. He saw Mesquite squarely before him, focussed on him, and became aware in a flash of what had happened. His hand again streaked to the holster, but stopped suddenly as an eye-baffling movement of the standing man ended in a levelled gun.

"You reach for that gun again an' I'll take it away from you," warned Mesquite

in grim humour. "Ain't you got no sense a-tall?"

"Yo're fired!" snapped the foreman. "Git yore belongin's, climb yore hoss, an' make dust!"

"Mebby I'm fired, but I'm not quittin' th' job," said Mesquite. "Me an' you will get along tolerable well if you mind yore own business an' keep yore mouth shut about me. Mebby th' time will come when you'll admit that Mrs. Ricketts' brother is a right good judge of men. We've had our trouble, an' we've had it out. Nobody saw it but us, an' you won't have to get killed tryin' to save yore face. You lost yore head an' acted like a damn fool. We're goin' to get along all right, after this. Get up an' brush yoreself off." The gun in the speaker's hand slipped back into its sheath.

Rankin was thinking swiftly. Under ordinary circumstances it would be only a question of which of the two men quit the ranch; but Mesquite was staying, and the foreman was not yet ready to quit; he could not quit. He had to stay on as foreman, not only for his own betterment, but for the betterment of others. And while Mesquite was working on the Lazy S they could keep him in sight and know something of what he was doing. A crafty light crept into the foreman's eyes, and he slowly arose, brushed himself, and then stepped forward, his hand going out.

"Damn fool I was," he admitted, trying to make his words ring true. "I'm admittin', now, that her brother knows men. I had no call to ride you; but a foreman is supposed to do th' hirin', an' it riled me. Are we all square?"

Mesquite ignored the hand for a moment, and then, having seen the crafty gleam in the other's eyes, swallowed his likes and dislikes and determined to be as crafty. He shook hands and smiled, trying to keep the frost out of it.

"Don't know as I blame you much; I know how you felt," he said; "but you'll find I can do my share on th' range. Let's forget th' boss's relations an' start right. I'll stand or fall by my work."

The foreman nodded and glanced out of the window, seeing the cook come out of the storehouse and close and lock the door. He sighed thankfully: no one would know of his humiliation except himself and the new man; and if he, Bruce Rankin, knew himself, the new man would not know it very long. His life was swiftly drawing to a close.

"Turn yore hoss into th' corral an' take yore pick," he ordered. "They wrangled in some good animals this mornin'. That white-faced roan is th' best of what's left."

Mesquite nodded impersonally.

"All right, boss. When do we eat?"

CHAPTER 7 - GROWING SUSPICIONS

The men began to straggle in, all hungry. They eyed the stranger with frank curiosity, took him to be a passing rider, and crowded the wash bench, if a four-man outfit can be said to crowd. Straggling into the house, they headed for the table and began to bedevil the cook for food. Mesquite followed them in as the foreman entered through the kitchen door and took his seat at the head of the table. There was one chair remaining, and Mesquite took it and drew up close.

"Boys," said Rankin, looking down the table, "meet Mesquite, there. He's th' new man, takin' Larry's place. Mesquite, this is Jim Colson, Ed Jones, Phil Cooke, an' my brother, Larry. Mesquite'll ride with you, Jim, this afternoon an' learn th' west range. We'll give him th' easiest job till he learns his way about."

The introductions were acknowledged in various ways, all satisfactory, and small talk was engaged in until the first heaping platter made its appearance, when all talk ceased. Mesquite ate as hungrily as the others and paid little attention to them; but inwardly he was smiling about his range assignment: he was to have the west side of the ranch, the section farthest from the fringes of the rough and broken country leading up the tableland, which he had partly explored. The man he would release from the innocent west section now would be free to help in any especial efforts being made on the eastern range. As yet none of those men knew anything regarding his status on the ranch, none of them knew that he was not one of themselves, carefully chosen by the foreman to fit into whatever plans they might have in common. This would not be long, however, for Rankin would warn them as quickly as he could.

Dinner over, the men loafed about for a few minutes and then left the house to get fresh mounts. Rankin had preceded them to the corral and was busily engaged in repairing the wire on a gate which needed no repairs. As each man passed through it he stopped, listened, and went on again; and Mesquite, sitting on the wash bench with Jim Colson, smiled to himself.

Jim arose, saw that his tobacco sack was not empty, that his papers were sufficient for the afternoon's smokes, and waved his hand.

"Come on, Mesquite," he said. "Let's go chase some cows." His grin was friendly, his joke a good-natured one.

They walked slowly to the corral as the foreman paused in his labours to wipe the perspiration from his forehead and to straighten his back. He looked up at the guy wires which sloped from the high post at the far end of the gate to hold it against sagging at its outer end, and which failed to hold it tightly enough. The wire was doubled, with a stick between the strands, and this was just out of the

foreman's reach. As the two men approached, Rankin eyed Jim, whose six-feet-three was very noticeable because of his leanness.

"Boss says I'm to have that white-faced roan," remarked Mesquite as they neared the foreman.

"Good hoss," said Jim; "but I like that big sorrel—he fits my long laigs better."

"Jim has to splice his stirrup leathers," said Rankin, grinning. He stepped aside to give them room to enter, and, after they had gone on almost to the centre of the corral, he raised his voice in sudden vexation.

"Jim! I need a step ladder to reach that stick. Come here an' twist it. This gate drags worse every day."

"If you had to splice yore stirrup leathers," chuckled Jim, "you wouldn't be so blame' helpless."

He reached the foreman's side and stretched up to work with the stick, which engaged him for a few moments; but it was long enough for him to hear Rankin's swift, low warning.

Mesquite did not turn his head, having anticipated some sort of stratagem for Jim's enlightenment. He swung his rope slowly, watched a horse that he did not want, and then, as his real choice became careless, dropped the loop over its head and hand by hand went up to it. He led it out of the corral and had it saddled before Jim captured the sorrel.

They rode carelessly out to the scene of the afternoon's work, which would be simple line riding, the turning back of cattle that wandered off the Lazy S range. It was monotonous, ordinary ranch work, and their eyes would be on the ground much of the time, for cattle make tracks, and tracks of comparative freshness which led the wrong way told of cattle straying across the line.

Jim was not quite as friendly as he had been back on the wash bench. There was nothing hostile in his attitude, but there was a reserve. Mesquite thought that the reserve would grow and unfriendliness develop and deepen after the foreman had more time to explain the situation.

On the way across the range they passed several old bulls, and Mesquite mentioned them.

"Up in Colorado," he said, "they shoot range bulls on sight, no matter who they belong to. They're improvin' their stock, up there, an' breedin' out th' old Longhorn as fast as they can."

"Yeah," replied Jim. "So are we, down here; but Rankin likes to have some of them old fellers around. They're too old to do any harm to th' strain, an' he figgers that three, four of 'em among th' lead cattle on a drive steadies th' whole bunch

an' keeps 'em pushin' on. He gets a fair price for 'em at th' other end, too; though what they do with that kinda beef shore puzzles me. I don't want to chew on none of it."

"Reckon they put it in cans," said Mesquite thoughtfully. "I reckon I've chewed some of it at an army post I once visited. Kinda jellied, in spots, stringy, dark red, with a taste like some kind of salt. Soldiers shore are tough fellers."

They reached the line, distinguishable by the trail which had been beaten out by the line riders for years. Here and there cattle tracks wandered across it, and now Mesquite was on his mettle. He had to know enough about tracks to show that he was a puncher, that he had ridden line; but he must not know too much about them. He preferred to let the sheriff have all the credit for the tracking which had pinned Tobe's death on Charley Lennox. Any good line rider knows, roughly, fresh tracks from old ones, and Mesquite must know that much and no more.

After a few minutes' riding he drew up, glanced at a line of tracks, and looked westward toward a brush-covered hollow half a mile off.

"When did you ride this part of th' line last?" he asked his companion.

"Yesterday mornin'," came the answer.

Mesquite pushed on along the line without saying anything more in regard to the hoof marks. In a minute they came to horse tracks. He knew as much about them as the man who had made them, but anybody could see they were about a day old. They ran westward and turned toward the other tracks. He nodded at them.

"You ride line like a man oughta," he remarked. "Find many in that brush yesterday?"

"Only th' feller that made them other tracks," answered Jim, grinning. "Yearlin' heifer, she was. I don't give 'em a chance to pile up on me. She was right frisky an' didn't want to leave th' brush, an' we had a kinda argument. Last I saw of her she was goin' due east with her tail up."

"Turn back many Box O cattle?" asked Mesquite, to make conversation.

"Not down at this end; but up on th' other end there's quite a few driftin' over. Th' Box O an' us ain't very friendly, but we work together that way."

This part of the range was excellent, so much so that Mesquite wondered how long it would be before the farmers discovered this basin and began to move in. Heavily grassed, well watered, rolling in gentle undulations, it promised sustenance for ten times the number of cattle that it now fed. Given the proper kind of supervision, honest range riding, and an even break in luck, there was no

reason why the Lazy S should not become even a better ranch than it once had been. Sell off every steer three years old or older; sell off every cow past bearing, every range bull, and spend the money judiciously for young cows and a few graded bulls, and the Lazy S would once more raise its head.

After a while they came to a long ridge which humped its back squarely along the trail. To the west of it the pasturelike land sloped gently for a mile or more; to the east a hollow formed, a brush-filled depression half a mile wide and several miles long. This hollow bent not far from the line and ran parallel with it. Mesquite's gaze swept over it and followed it northward.

His companion noticed his attention, and smiled.

"We don't have to do much turnin' along here," said Jim. "Th' cattle wander up to that, push into it, an' stay there. They don't straggle on an' across th' line."

"Reckon not," replied Mesquite, glancing along the line at the tracks which here led eastward exclusively.

"Box O cattle are th' only ones that cross th' line," said Jim, explaining the tracks. "We let 'em stay in there till th' roundups, when a couple Box O men cut 'em out an' drift 'em home."

This explanation was perfectly satisfactory on its face, and Mesquite at this time cared little about the Box O or its cattle. Some day, when he enjoyed the assignment of riding this line by himself, he would go through the brush in the hollow and familiarize himself with it and with what it might contain. He idly reflected that the Box O brand could not be altered to that of the Ace of Clubs and gave the matter no more thought for the present.

"You belong to this part of th' country?" casually asked Jim.

Mesquite shook his head.

"Not this far west," he answered. "Born down in Texas an' grew up there. Wandered round a little in New Mexico, been through th' Nations, an' sorta drifted up th' old Western Trail to see th' sights. Been up North, two, three years. It's all right in th' summer, but th' winters are another story. Got tired of 'em an' started back South, wanderin' here an' there as long as my money held out. Worked to get more an' went on ag'in. I was headin' back to Texas, straight as I could travel, when I got busted ag'in. Then I struck this country an' got a job: an' here I am. What kind of winters do you have down here?" he asked, with interest.

"Perty bad, sometimes," answered Jim. "That is, outside this basin. Th' worst weather goes around us, kind of. We ain't had no norther since I been here. Don't have to bother with winter feedin', a-tall."

Mesquite sighed from relief.

"Glad of that. I got awful fed up cuttin' hay, haulin' hay, stackin' hay in th' hottest weather; an' feedin' hay in th' coldest weather a man ever held a pitchfork in."

"Reckon I wouldn't like that," commented Jim. "Corn-fed ridin' stock, up there, I reckon?"

"Yes; winter feed is corn an' grain. They have to have it if you want 'em good."

"These hosses down here don't know what it looks like or tastes like," said Jim.

"There's a funny thing about that," said Mesquite. "Up North I heard more than one man tell that when he bought some of the cavvy from trail outfits that had come up from th' Gulf Coast of Texas, that them hosses wouldn't touch corn till they was made to."

"Reckon they have their liars up North, too," reflected Jim, grinning. "You put any stock in that yoreself?"

"Yes; I heard it from too many fellers, an' some of 'em was right truthful."

"Well, mebby it is true," said Jim grudgingly; "but it don't make no patches on my pants, so I don't care. There's th' trail leadin' over to th' Ace of Clubs, near where th' river has cut itself a gorge through th' Ridge."

"Yeah, I know," said Mesquite without hesitation. "I rode over it to th' Ace of Clubs, hopin' to get me a job there. I'd rather get me my own job, on my own hook," he explained without going any further into the subject; he was satisfied to burn his little backfire against what the foreman would say to Jim and the others when he found the chance to speak of it.

Jim laughed in genuine enjoyment.

"They ain't hirin'," he said, and then the grin faded slowly. "Just as well you didn't get a job there. We don't think very much of th' Ace of Clubs. Ain't no real hard feelin's, but we just kinda let 'em alone." He acted as though he was going to say more along that line, but changed his mind.

"Well, judgin' from th' two I saw in Parsons' Saloon," said Mesquite, "I wasn't a whole lot struck by that outfit; but when a feller needs a job, he can't allus pick an' choose."

Jim nodded with understanding, and in a few moments they neared the little trail in silence, their eyes on the rider who was following it in their direction. It was Pecos Sam, and he scowled at them both with no partiality.

Jim stopped, and Mesquite pulled up beside him.

"You Ace of Clubs fellers ridin' line over east?" asked Jim.

Pecos Sam slowed to a walk and grudgingly stopped.

"Yes," he answered shortly.

"From what th' boys say, you-all must ride with yore eyes closed."

"That so?"

"Yeah; there's a lot of Ace of Clubs cattle driftin' over onto us, eatin' off all our grass."

"Reckon you better drive 'em back ag'in, an' then cross over an' head back some of them Lazy S hawgs," retorted Pecos, kneeing his horse on its way again. He turned in the saddle and looked back. "If you'd keep yore cattle to home, oun wouldn't have to cross no line to keep from starvin' to death. Ourn ain't sheep, to live on next to nothin'; but th' way yore critters crop our grass, we reckon there's sheep strain in them."

Jim scratched his head and chuckled, looking after the departing rider.

"I can allus get a rise out of Pecos," he said; "but some day me an' him are goin' to have trouble, personal an' private. I don't like no man whose eyes are set so close together. You got to watch 'em."

Mesquite took the little by-play and his companion's remarks at face value, so far as any outward signs were concerned; but they did not fit in with what he, himself, had reason to believe was the real relationship between the outfits of the two ranches.

"How come Rankin's brother is throwin' in with them fellers?" he asked, and he saw that his question carried a jolt.

Jim smiled apologetically and lazily turned to face his companion.

"Larry's a wild sort," he said. "He don't take after his brother a mite. Th' Ace of Clubs offered him a chance to make more money, an' Larry wants to get hobbled. Don't know who th' girl is, for th' Kid's close mouthed. Just th' same, he's makin' a mistake, tyin' up with that crowd."

He shook his head gently, regretfully.

"Nobody can tell a kid anythin': they run ag'in' th' rope, get burned an' throwed, an' wonder how it happened. Very next time they do th' same thing over ag'in."

Mesquite nodded understandingly and wondered where he had ever met so plausible a liar. They rode on, up an almost imperceptible slope, with the Ridge straight ahead of them and a score of miles away. The end of the east line lay on the near bank of a small stream which angled down the long incline and the heights beyond it. Jim turned his horse and faced westward, his long arm outstretched.

"Over yonder is th' Box O," he said. "Their headquarters lie up on th' first bench,

th' other side of that second ridge slantin' down from th' mountains. Their range runs along th' other side of this crick, an' goes on for half a dozen miles, where th' Ace of Clubs begins. It was this part of th' Box O that old Tobe used to drive over; th' Ace of Clubs wasn't here in them days, an' him an' th' Box O used all th' range them fellers graze to-day. Th' Ace of Clubs came in an' squatted, later buyin' their headquarters an' a strip of land runnin' east. That strip is kinda like a fence: it is long an' narrow, an' it shore was a red flag to old Tobe. He drove acrost it, let his cattle range all over, right up to th' Ridge, an' as far up that as they would go. There was quite some trouble, off an' on, though it never came to shootin' when th' trouble was at its worst.

"Th' Box O an' him used to have a lot of trouble, too; an' even th' Star Bar, over west of th' Box O, went on th' prod. At first they used to sit back an' enjoy th' squabblin' of Tobe an' th' others, till one day when Tobe pushed a big herd acrost th' south end of th' Box O an' turned 'em loose on th' Star Bar's best grass; an' held 'em there, too, for more'n three weeks, with his whole outfit backin' 'em up. Th' Star Bar an' th' Box O joined hands, drove a whackin' big herd of Box O cattle acrost th' line near here, an' spread 'em all over Tobe's best pasture. He had to call his outfit back to round 'em up an' drive 'em back ag'in; an' then th' Star Bar cleaned up their own range with a grand stampede of Lazy S cattle."

Mesquite was chuckling. In his mind's eye he could see the truculent old rancher, who believed in free grass for his own herds and not for the herds of others; he could see the old man before age had dulled the edge of his purpose and spoiled the temper. His was the heart and the soul of the real, old-time cattle baron; stronger than the strong men about him, ruthless in his demands, and making them good. It was such as he who gave history herd figures the like of which never had been known before; who counted their cattle by the thousand, and who could not count them all; who owned or dominated whole counties, and who really were feudal lords with feudal power.

"If th' old man had to be killed," said Mesquite thoughtfully, "it should have been done when he was raisin' hell, an' not when he had become old an' near harmless."

Jim's face clouded with genuine regret.

"Yes; it was just like shootin' down a grizzly that was on its last laigs," he growled. "Whoever done it wouldn't 'a' faced old Tobe ten, fifteen years back. You find th' biggest coward in th' country, an' you'll find th' killer. I never had no love for Tobe, but I'll lend my rope to hang th' coyote that shot him."

Jim's voice had taken on earnestness, and to Mesquite it rang true. Whatever else the man might be, he felt only contempt for the murderer of old Tobe

Ricketts. Jim Colson was likable, and Mesquite felt, somehow, that there was much in the man that was worth while. He would keep an eye on Jim, and for a while, at least, classify him a little apart from the others.

He laughed and looked at Colson.

"Well, now, I reckon th' range can settle back in peace, seein' that old Tobe is dead. Any cattle stealin' goin' on?"

"Oh, there was, for a while—while th' ranches was quarrellin' among themselves," answered Jim; "but it's right hard to get stolen animals out of this basin without bein' seen. You see, there's only one way out, to th' east: th' reg'lar trail or road. We ain't been bothered much down in this part of th' country."

They swung around and started back the way they had come, and by the time they reached the south end of the line it was time to ride in to the bunkhouse. Mesquite had shown a knowledge of tracks common enough to most line riders, and nothing beyond that; and his companion had no reason to do any thinking about any unusual ability in that line.

They were the first to reach headquarters, and Mesquite had an opportunity to become acquainted with the cook, a colourless, inoffensive person whose weak eyes watered in a strong light and blinked incessantly. The blinking, Jim confided, was a "habit."

The first of the other men to ride in was Ed Jones, and his covert glances at Mesquite were not friendly. He took the first opportunity which presented itself to get Jim aside and to talk earnestly with him in a low voice; and after the conference Jim's occasional glance at the newcomer was one of puzzled uncertainty and lacked the friendliness he had shown earlier in the day.

Phil Cooke rode in next, and his attitude was more pronounced than that of Jones; it bordered on the hostile, and Cooke seemed to be on the verge of starting trouble, but he held himself down, and there were no developments along that line. It was so patent that Mesquite had deliberately to ignore it; but from time to time frost gathered in the latter's eyes, to be dissipated only by an act of will. The four men loafed on the long bench just outside the door and tried to break up the silence that threatened to enwrap them; but the attempts steadily weakened, and finally ceased altogether, and each man sat wrapped in his own thoughts. This unpleasant situation persisted until the foreman and his brother rode around the corner, stripped the leather from their horses and turned the animals into the corral.

They carried their equipment inside the house, and the foreman's voice was heard demanding speed on the part of the cook. His brother loafed through the

door and leaned against the wall close to it, his eyes sullen and suspicious when they rested on the new man. Larry's deftness with his Colt was such that, taken together with his character, he promised to blossom out as the basin's worst bad man. Not many men who knew him cared to let an argument with Larry go to extremes; and his conceit and nature had fed upon this.

Behind him, his face troubled, appeared the foreman, and for a moment his hand rested upon the young man's shoulder. Larry shrugged it off defiantly and swung back against the wall.

The atmosphere was becoming ominous, and every man felt it and grew uneasy and a little tense. The silence was heavy and portentous.

Jim Colson broke it.

"Well, have any troubles on th' east line to-day?" he slowly asked, turning his head to look at Larry and the foreman.

"No more than usual," answered the foreman, quick to help Jim change the atmosphere. "Same number of damn fool animals hell bent to get up into th' brush."

"I don't know as it's much good tryin' to keep 'em out of it," said Jones suggestively. "Might save a lot of useless work if we let 'em wander an' then ran a big round-up there, spring an' fall. We run one, anyhow: so why wear ourselves out an' run our hosses ragged tryin' to turn back every critter that heads acrost?"

Mesquite pictured the riders and the horses. Neither appeared to have been run ragged or worn out. He edged over a little from his next companion, giving himself arm room in case anything broke, and sat forward on the edge of the bench. The movement caught Larry's eye, and the youth smiled grimly and set his feet.

"Runnin' a round-up in th' brush ain't no pleasant job," said Mesquite, shaking his head. "You can't never comb 'em all out. Once let 'em get into th' brush, an' they got things purty much their own way, seems to me."

"They got things *all* their own way," growled Jones. "I ain't got no love for wire, but if there is any place that wire oughta be put, it's along that end of th' ranch."

"Mebby it will be," said Larry lowly but distinctly, voicing his contempt for any man who got his job through family "pull," "if th' widder's brother sends it with his tag on it."

With the last word Larry's hand dropped swiftly to his gun.

Three men ducked, the fourth leaped to his feet, twisting as he moved; but the foreman's hand was gripping his brother's wrist and holding it down until it seemed as though the gun would be forced through the bottom of the holster.

His other hand was upraised in warning.

Mesquite sheathed his guns and relaxed.

"Sudden like," he said grimly; "but I felt it comin'. Turn him loose, Rankin: let's see if he can shoot th' brother's tag off of me!"

Larry was looking into the frosty eyes, his own hot and sparkling; but the frost killed the heat, and the youngster's glance wavered and fell. His hand left the gun and dropped to his side, opening and shutting nervously; and he seemed to constrict in the throat and around the heart, until his breathing became laboured. Larry had just made the discovery that others had made before him: there stood Death, cold, certain, swift as light, almost impersonal; there stood a man who killed, when he had to, not in the heat of passion, but in the frost of it, outwardly placid, unemotional.

"I didn't say you had no tag on you," muttered the hothead, squirming.

"That's right," said Mesquite in a cold, level voice; "so you didn't. You listen too much with yore ears an' swaller what you hear. That lets you off. If you aim to work up a reputation as a bad man, you want to save me as long as you can."

The cook's frightened voice announced that supper was ready, and Mesquite smiled.

"Now let's feed an' behave ourselves," he said.

Larry's shamed face, red as it could be under layers of tan, turned slowly away, and its owner slouched through the door, beaten, disgraced; but in its owner's heart there arose the infant head of murder, to be coddled through the days.

The collective sign of relief was the signal to follow Larry into the house, and to sit down and eat a tasteless supper in a most unpleasant atmosphere.

CHAPTER 8 - AN ACCIDENT

Jim Colson had returned to the east line, there to work with his friends, and Mesquite was riding the west line alone. For two days he had behaved as an unsuspicious man would, paying no attention to anything but line riding, in case he was being watched; and each time he returned to the bunkhouse he found awaiting him that same quiet unfriendliness; but there were no overt acts, no pointed remarks; and Larry's departure for the Ace of Clubs had removed the most dangerous spark from the tinder.

On the third day there was a change in his riding, for he left the line and went down into the long, brush-filled depression east of it, which Jim and he had spoken of on their first ride together.

The depression was very fertile as compared to that of the higher surrounding

ground; for the rainwater flowed down the slopes, washing vegetal matter with it, and remaining in the bottom long after the surrounding slopes were parched. Its vegetation was dense, with little openings leading through it which had been kept open by the passing of cattle.

He chose the first of these openings he came to and entered the brush. There were movements on both sides of him as he rode slowly along, where cattle stirred at his intrusion; and he searched out many of these animals and found that, while there were numbers of Lazy S cattle, there were also quite a few Box O animals; and there were a few Box O yearlings, and a fair proportion of unbranded yearlings. These latter could be Box O or Lazy S animals, and these could be rounded up and drifted to and across the east line, to become the property of the Ace of Clubs by the impress of a stamping iron.

Back on the line once more, he pushed on more rapidly than usual, reached the turning point and hastened back until he came opposite the end of the draw; and for the next few miles he made a study of all tracks crossing the boundary. Four fifths of them led eastward, toward the draw, which meant that many Box O cattle entered the bushy depression and remained there.

When had the unbranded yearlings entered it? It could not have been after the spring round-up, else they would have been branded. Then they must have gone in before that time; but before that they would have been with their mothers. Either the calves had been taken from the mother cows and driven in, or both had gone in together. This problem, without other factors, was inconclusive, and would have to wait until something showed the right answer.

At noon he ate a silent meal with the rest of the outfit, and loitered behind until the others had filed out to the corral to get their horses. As they rode off toward the east line, he slowly started for the corral, where he leisurely roped, saddled, and mounted his choice of the remaining animals and started for the west line; but on reaching a shallow ravine, which ran roughly north and south, and which was deep enough to hide a horseman from the ranch buildings, and therefore from the cook's sight, he turned and followed it southward to a point well beyond the ranch house and which put the ranch house between him and the cook's galley. Here his slowness ceased, and he headed up the bank and rode at a lope straight for the ranch house, keeping it between him and the bunkhouse kitchen. In a short time he was dismounting before the ranch house door, and Jane Ricketts answered his knock.

"Well," she said, smiling a little as she stepped back to make room for him to enter, "I saw you pop up out of that gully an' head straight for th' house. I suppose you got somethin' to tell me?"

"No, ma'am," he replied, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. "I haven't learned anythin' positive, an' that means that I ain't got anythin' to tell you. I've been wantin' to have a good look at them tally books, an' this seemed to be a right good chance. You reckon you can find 'em handy?"

"I don't have to find 'em," she replied, turning toward the old-fashioned black walnut desk. "I been findin' 'em, some of 'em almost hid by dust. Why Tobe used such little, thin books, I don't know; but I do know that they're all here, arranged in order. Th' top one is th' last, an' in 'em all you'll find th' cattle hist'ry of this ranch."

He took them from her, put them on the table, and then took the chair out of her hands and placed it beside the books.

"Looks like I'm goin' to have kind of a heavy time, readin' an' figgerin'," he said, smiling.

"Land sakes! You don't mean to tell me that yo're goin' through all them books?"

"No, no, ma'am; just back far enough to get a good idea of what this ranch did five, six years ago; an' what it's been doin' every year since then."

"Well, all right; there they all are. You want any help from me?" she asked. "Then all right to that, too. I'll go finish my reddin' up; Lord knows there's enough to do to keep my old hands busy, but not as much now as there was when Tobe was here." Her face became wistful and sad, its lines deepening. "There ain't nothin' like keepin' busy," she sighed.

"Yes, ma'am; I know," said Mesquite uncomfortably.

"Seems like I'll have to have a man around this house," she said, looking keenly at him. "Miss th' tobacco smoke an' ashes; miss th' clutterin' up. Ain't got nobody to find fault with, except myself, an' there ain't any satisfaction in that. Yo're bunk right comfortable down there in that bunkhouse?"

"Ma'am, you remind me quite some of my mother," he replied, the fading coldness of his face now disappearing altogether.

"Yet you run off all over th' country an' leave her, young man."

"Yes, that was so; but last year she went off an' left me. I went back, when I learned she was goin', but I got there too late —they was buryin' her when I rode up."

"Young man, you get yore belongin's out of that bunkhouse," said Jane with forced asperity. "I reckon you need me an' I need you."

He shook his head regretfully.

"Some day, ma'am, but not yet," he said. "I've got to be just one of th' men till I finish th' job I'm tacklin'." He smiled. "Then I'll clutter up yore house an' make you wish you'd left good enough alone."

She turned away, her eyes a little misty.

"Well," she almost snorted, "you do th' readin' an' I'll do th' dustin'," and left the room.

Mesquite seated himself and drew the books to him, his thoughts far from them; but he shook his head and chose the tally books in which he was most interested. They were small, thin memorandum books, of a size to fit in a pocket; but in them were the transactions of the ranch in all ways regarding cattle. For two hours he read and figured and struck totals, until he had the essentials fixed in his mind; and then he arose, put the books back into the drawer of the desk, and stepped to the kitchen door.

"All through?" demanded Jane briskly. "Learn anythin'? Find out why th' ranch is totterin'?"

"Learned quite some, ma'am," he gravely answered. "I reckon this ranch is comin' back to where it once was; 'though it's mebby goin' to take a long time. I don't reckon there'll be any shootin' this side of th' bunkhouse," he finished, grinning.

"Well!" snapped Jane, her eyes sparkling a little, "if shootin' this side of th' bunkhouse will help th' Lazy S to amount to somethin', then you shoot all yo're a mind to, anywhere on th' ranch!" She was searching his eyes. "You reckon there's been somethin' wrong goin' on around here?"

"Ma'am, there's usually somethin' wrong goin' on everywhere," he answered. "I'm goin' to ride my line, where I ain't in th' way. Nobody is supposed to know anythin' about this visit but you an' me."

"If you don't try a person's patience! Don't you ever answer any questions right out plain?"

"Not till I'm shore that I know th' right answer; then I mostly answer right out plain," he said, smiling; and the coldness had crept back into his face and eyes.

"All right, then; get on about yore business an' let me get about mine!"

He smiled again, turned on his heel, picked up his sombrero as he passed the table, and went out to his horse, Jane slowly following him; and she stood behind the dotted white curtains and watched him until he dropped from sight into the ravine. And long after he had disappeared she stood thus, staring out at nothing.

Mesquite's mind was busy as he rode south in the ravine, heading for a point where he would not be in sight of the cook when he left it. A low line of prairie

swell gave him this opportunity, and it was not much longer after that before he came to the south end of the boundary.

His suspicions were being strengthened by everything he learned. One set of facts alone, which he had gleaned from his reading, stood out challengingly: in the spring following the coming of the Ace of Clubs outfit, the number of yearlings took a decided slump; in the second year the yearlings were still fewer, and two-year-olds almost negligible; in the third year the yearlings still further shrunk, and there were but a small number of three-year-olds in that year's drive. And so it went, the branding tallies and the drive figures steadily falling off. It seemed that after the arrival of Pecos Sam and his partners most of the cows of the Lazy S had stopped calving. The rule-of-thumb proposition of natural increase, of one to five, had quit working on the Lazy S. Its calves mysteriously disappeared, some of them before branding, when the tallies were made; and some of them after it.

What could he do, while roped to the west line day after day, where nothing happened out of the ordinary, and where he could not watch the rest of the outfit at work? Here he was, riding to and fro over the part of the range farthest from the Lazy S activities, side-tracked, like a fool, where he could learn nothing. There would have to be a change of some kind: just what, he did not know. He might even have to quit the outfit and disappear for a while; but if he did that he must not forget that his excuse for looking for work had been that he was out of money and needed the job.

He found the others at the bunkhouse when he rode in, and sensed that something unusual was in the air. They all spoke to him with a cordiality that he tried to reciprocate, but he felt that his part in the acting was a failure, as much a failure as theirs. He was too suspicious of them, too antagonistic, too certain of what he felt they were doing, and had been doing, to be convincing in any pretenses of friendliness.

One of the men, Ed Jones, was dusting himself off with the broom, and replying in good spirit to the bantering of his friends.

Phil Cooke, his face split by a grin, looked at the assembled outfit, including Mesquite, and explained the matter.

"He looked around at me an' waved," said Cooke, "just as his hoss started down a cut-bank. When Ed stood up to turn around, th' hoss stepped on somethin' that gave way, an' Ed went right up in th' air like a bird, only a bird's feet don't rise up over its head like his did. You'd 'a' laughed yoreselves sick if you'd seen it."

"Yeah; funny as hell, wasn't it?" growled Jones, pausing in his labours. His frown increased as he emptied a pocket of loose tobacco and dirt; and when he drew

his gun from its holster he found it covered with oily mud and the barrel choked. The holster, up-ended, shed its share, and amid the laughter of the rest Jones stamped into the house, swearing monotonously as he went. One thing about the gun had not become soiled, somehow; the string which tied the trigger back against the guard was singularly clean. Mesquite's eyes had been drawn to the tied trigger, a symbol of one kind of gun play; and the picture of that fairly clean string remained in his mind.

Supper was wordier than usual, Jones's accident keeping the talk going; and when the outfit left the table he was still growling. While the others seated themselves against the wall to pass the few hours between supper and bedtime, Jones took down his gun belt, removed the weapon, and cleaned out the sheath thoroughly. That done, gun in hand, he took some bits of rag and a cleaning rod from a shelf, kicked a box over to his chair, and sat down to go to work.

Mesquite watched him curiously and glanced at the rest of the men from time to time, wondering what had caused their sudden affability; but most of the time he watched Jones, who, although he had been thrown from a falling horse down a cut-bank and his holster and pockets partly filled with sand and dust, had no bruises, no scratches, and apparently not a sore or aching bone or muscle. Then he looked at the gun which Jones had just placed on the box while he went to get a screw driver. There was nothing unusual about the weapon except its dirty condition and the comparatively clean trigger string. It was the old reliable 1873 model single-action cavalry Colt, and its barrel was seven and one-half inches long, instead of the shorter barrelled artillery model, which was then becoming the favourite type. It was the same gun that Mesquite carried on both thighs. He looked up from it as the foreman spoke.

"Little mite of sand won't do it no harm, Ed," said Rankin, winking at Mesquite. "You ain't goin' to take it all apart, are you?"

"No, I ain't goin' to take it all apart," retorted Jones, again seating himself. "You know how to clean it better than I do?" he demanded with some sharpness.

"No, sir. I heard you was an expert cleaner."

"We just saw how expert he was with th' broom," laughed Cooke; but the laugh was forced, strained. It had a ragged edge to it.

Mesquite glanced at the last speaker and thought he saw a tenseness on the man's face. Jim Colson appeared to be set for something, something which to him was disagreeable. Here was food for thought, for conjecture: Jim was the man who had come in contact with the new puncher, who had shown a certain friendliness—and Jim was tense and troubled.

Mesquite looked at the foreman, and caught that person's eyes swiftly shifting from his own face; and the foreman's expression held a poorly concealed satisfaction, and about him there was an air of eagerness.

Imagination is a wonderful thing, a valuable asset; but an imagination prompted and guided by a mind trained in reading signs of the most subtle nature; directed by a mind which had been in such close communion with a master of subtlety, with an old warrior whose experiences had had to do with all kinds of subterfuges, circumlocutions, and with all kinds of cunning; such an imagination, now stimulated by the mysteries existing on the Lazy S, was quick to seize upon and run down the probable and the possible; and to Mesquite's suspicious mind there was something untoward in the air, something which boded no good to himself. The coldness of his face increased, and the frost began to creep into his eyes. Whatever it was, it concerned Ed Jones and that dirty gun; therefore, while his gaze might wander about the room, not for one instant was his real, his alert attention to leave the man cleaning that weapon.

Jones had picked up the gun and was loosening the screw which held the cylinder pin from slipping out. Then he remembered that the cartridges were still in their chambers, and it was instinctive caution which made him half-cock the hammer and push out, one by one, the loaded shells. While he did this Mesquite was like a cat, ready for instant action; but the possible threat passed with the last cartridge to drop out, and the alert watcher slowly, cautiously relaxed. Then Jones took out the pin and cylinder and placed them on the box.

The talk had swung away from Jones and his troubles by this time, and he took no part in it, working silently with cleaning rod and rags. Putting down the frame, he picked up the cylinder and cleaned it thoroughly, and then cleaned each dirty cartridge in turn, and as he finished with each one of these he absently shoved it back into a chamber of the cylinder. This unininstinctive action caught and held Mesquite's attention; this was the first false move that the man had made. Mesquite glanced swiftly from the cylinder up to the man's face, and saw it grow hard and speculative; and the talk around him speeded up and became forced.

Mesquite and the others were seated against the west wall of the house, Mesquite in the south corner, the others in the north. Jones sat facing that wall and his friends, perhaps five feet from them, and with his left side toward Mesquite. The entire group was thus under the latter's eyes, and they were in the arc of his vision even when he watched Jones most closely. And by now Jones made no movement which escaped the alert watcher. The tied-back trigger of the Colt on the box had a little to do with this, too: it bespoke the gunman, and it told that the trigger could be ignored. The gun would fire if its hammer were drawn

or struck back, and this was another fact that had important significance.

Jones picked up the cylinder and reached for the frame, Mesquite wondering if the man was fool enough to make a practice of shoving loaded cylinders into revolvers; it did not seem to be his practice in view of the care with which he had unloaded the cylinder before removing it. The watching punchers' conversation lagged, their interest deepened; Rankin's face was growing fiercely eager, while Jim Colson's became grave.

As Jones took up the frame in his right hand, the barrel swung in Mesquite's direction, as it had swung half a dozen times while it was being cleaned; it wavered, moved about, and then pointed at the floor mid-way between the two men. Its owner pushed in the cylinder, shoved the pin home, and reached for the screw driver with his left hand, his left arm passing over the hammer as the barrel swung up, and the movement was warning enough to a man of Mesquite's calibre and blazing suspicions. He leaped from his chair as the gun roared, and his own right-hand gun echoed the shot while the left was balanced for action and covering the men against the wall.

Jones's yell of surprise was much more real, natural, and unstudied than he had dared to hope for: the cleaned weapon had been ripped from his grasp and driven across the room by the terrific impact of Mesquite's shot. Jones was holding a wrenched wrist, and his right-hand thumb was curiously out of any normal position.

The others were rigidly immobile, staring at the bleak muzzles of the guns in the new puncher's hands. The hammers were straining at the hooked thumbs, and no man made the mistake of swift movement. Their expressions were rare studies, disappointment blended with incredulity, changing into incredulity and fear; and then incredulity faded out.

"My Gawd!" whispered Rankin, the first to get command of his thoughts. He glared at Jones. "You —— —— fool! Ain't you got no more sense than to push a loaded cylinder into that gun?"

"Obeyin' orders, mebby!" snapped Mesquite, the frost gleaming in his eyes like a white shroud.

"What you mean?" asked the foreman in blank surprise.

"Just another accident with a loaded gun, when th' news was told!" said Mesquite. "They hang folks for murder; but accidents ain't murder. Now, then, you damn coyotes, if you want me killed, let's make it an even break. There are three

of you left, able to shoot. We'll go outside, draw two lines in th' dirt, an' have it out. Th' three of you on one line, an' me on th' other! An' if Jones wants to join you an' try his left hand, I'll be right glad."

"Hell, man!" cried the foreman; "we don't want you killed! Why should we?"

"Huh!" sneered Mesquite, his teeth showing, contempt on his face. "You don't eh? First *you* tried it, right here in this room; then Larry started a deal of his own; an' now Jones has bungled his try at it. If you ain't got th' guts to stand on that line, then you listen to me, an' listen close: this little job you've picked out mustn't be bungled. You want to get me like old Tobe was got; from behind, an' at a distance, for th' first man of you that makes a suspicious move in my sight will never make another! Get into yore bunks, an' don't you let a straw rustle after th' lights go out. I'm bunkin' in th' ranchhouse, startin' to-night; but I'm goin' to see you all in bed, with yore guns hung on th' chairs at th' table, before I leave. Drop yore gun belts, an' start sheddin'."

Life had flowed back into Jones's numbed fingers, and his thumb and wrist were throbbing with pain.

"Yo're wrong, Mesquite!" he growled. "I didn't have no idea that damn gun was goin' off!"

"Nor mine, neither," retorted Mesquite, his eyes on the others. "Yo're a poor liar, Jones. When these tumblebugs get into their bunks I'll fix that thumb, an' if you move while I'm doin' it, I'll break yore jaw so you'll never chew again. G'wan, you coyotes; get out of them gun belts an' clothes!"

They slowly, shamefacedly obeyed him, as if an angry reluctance could save their faces. One by one they carried their belts to the table and hung them from the chairs; one by one they returned, to undress together; and one by one they climbed into their bunks, silent but seething.

Mesquite backed until he was behind the injured man, with him and the bunks in the same line of vision; and, breaking a sliver from the edge of the box, he yanked Jones's bandanna from its pocket and in a few minutes had the thumb splinted and bandaged.

"You mebby wonder why I'm doin' this?" he said grimly.

Jones cleared his throat, but did not speak.

"I'm not doin' it for you," said Mesquite, his voice coldly humorous. "I'm doin' it so it'll get well an' be near as good as ever, so you can use it, some time, on th' hammer of a gun, at me." He stood up, both hands resting on his guns. "Shuck yoreself out of them clothes an' get into yore bunk; an' don't be too slow about it."

In another few minutes Mesquite looked with satisfaction at the filled bunks, picked up Jones's Colt, and then walked to the table and strung the belts on his left arm. He turned and went slowly toward the door and, as he reached it, he stopped and faced about.

"I don't reckon you fellers will need any guns as long as I'm here on th' ranch to protect you," he said, his eyes straying to the rifles in a corner, and then to his own rifle in its long sheath. "Accidents are terrible things, an' when idiots have guns they might shoot each other. I'll take th' rifles, too," and he made good his statement. As he reached the door again he faced about for one last look at the outfit, laughed coldly, and stepped into the night.

There was a light in the ranchhouse kitchen, and the door was open. As he neared the building a shadow moved in the deeper shadow of the wall, and his right hand whipped out and up. Then the shadow moved into the light of a window, and he slid the gun back again.

"Yo're all right? You ain't hurt?" came Jane's voice, strained by anxiety.

"No, ma'am," he answered. "I ain't hurt a bit; but I'm aimin' to sleep in that bed you was speakin' about."

"Reckoned you'd get some sense!" came the swift retort. "Land sakes! What you got there?"

"Weapons, ma'am; mixed weapons," he chuckled, the cold out of his face and voice, the frost out of his eyes. "Careless fellers shouldn't have guns, ma'am."

"'Ma'am! Ma'am'!" she mimicked. "Did you call yore maw that?"

"No, ma'am; I didn't."

"'Ma'am' again!" she snorted. "What did you call her?"

"Why, I called her Maw."

"Well, young man, from now on you can call me th' same. I'm aimin' to darn yore socks, an' that's somethin' I'd never do for no man except a husband or a son. Here, put them guns in th' pantry: it's th' only door in th' house that's got a lock, an' why they put one on that door I'm shore I don't know."

CHAPTER 9 - TEXAS BOUND

When morning came Mesquite was at the bunkhouse before even the cook was up. He strode into the main room, alert and on the balls of his feet, for there might have been an extra gun on the premises; lacking that, a thrown knife was a possibility; but the men were asleep, stirring only when they sensed his presence. He went to his bunk, rolled his possessions in his blankets, and then went slowly toward the door.

The foreman rubbed sleepy eyes and blinked at the intruder, and as recognition came to him, he frowned and growled an inquiry.

"What you want?"

"Nothin'," answered Mesquite. "Nothin' but my cayuse. I ain't fool enough to stay on no ranch where I've got to watch every man of th' outfit all th' time, wakin' or sleepin'. I'm bringin' you th' good news that I'm quittin'. I don't like th' way grudges are paid off in this country, an' there's too much cover to suit me, out along my line."

"Well, I reckon we can get along without you," rejoined the foreman, and a sarcastic snicker came from another bunk. "Yo're too fond of stickin' yore nose into other people's business. Charley Lennox is a sample of that. Oh, surprised you, did I?" The foreman laughed in his throat "I know th' sheriff ain't got sense enough to fasten that killin' on Charley without help. Hell!"

"Oh, so that's th' way yore mind's been workin'?" sarcastically asked Mesquite. "Then it looks like Charley had some right good friends in th' outfit that took its pay from th' man he killed. There's some odours that are right hard to get rid of, an' right disgustin': hangin' round this damn outfit ain't good for my nose. I'm pullin' my stakes before I have to bury my clothes."

"Act kinda like you was afraid you might be in 'em," came an angry voice from a bunk.

"I just said as much," retorted Mesquite, "when I spoke about th' cover along th' west line. You can have yore guns after you eat breakfast. Ask Mrs. Ricketts to look in th' pantry, where I put 'em, last night."

"Want me to give you yore time?" asked the foreman, pushing his legs over the edge of the bunk.

"Listen, you! I'm nearly busted flat, but I got too much pride to take any money from you. I'd never get th' smell of it outa my pockets."

The other bunks were beginning to unload their occupants, and in the kitchen there was a purposeful stirring. Mesquite walked over to his saddle, picked it up, and went through the door, heading for the corral without a backward glance. He caught the first horse he saw, and in a moment was riding off to hunt up his own, and in this quest he was lucky, for he found it within a quarter of an hour. Roping it, it did not take him long to change mounts, and he rode back straight for the ranchhouse.

Mrs. Ricketts was standing in the door as he dismounted, and the odours of coffee and frying bacon wafted past her.

"Why, ain't that yore own horse?" she asked curiously.

"Yes; I'm quittin' th' ranch," he answered, and in a low voice continued in an effort to banish the look which flashed to her face: "but I'm not quittin' you, Maw. Do I smell breakfast?"

"Yes, you do. Reckon you can eat some warmed-over corn bread?"

"You watch me an' see," he chuckled as he followed her into the kitchen.

She closed the door slowly and then faced him.

"What was it you just said, out there, about quittin'?" she asked a little anxiously.

"I can't do this ranch any good when I'm shoved off out of th' way an' ain't got any business to go pokin' around. I thought it all out before I rode in, yesterday; an' Ed Jones, cleanin' his gun right careless, missed me clean, an' gave me th' excuse I was lookin' for to pull my picket pin an' move on."

He plunged his cupped hands into the wash basin, shoved his face down between them, and rubbed briskly.

"Then what?" asked the widow. She held out a towel and watched him use it.

"Why, I'm ridin' along about my business," he chuckled, "which ain't changed any, a-tall. I'll ride along till I get well out of sight an' out of th' country. Then I'm aimin' to put in my time out in th' hills, east of here, to find out just what's th' matter with th' Lazy S. I'll have a good chance to learn somethin', that way."

"But what do you reckon is wrong with th' ranch?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I reckon there's quite a lot of things wrong with it, ma'am."

"An' that's one of 'em—that '*ma'am!*'" she retorted.

"Sorry, Maw."

"You don't look it," she replied, eyeing his grin; "but I'll admit that yore face looks a lot better with that silly grin on it than it does with icicles all over it. Will it do any good to fire th' whole outfit an' get new men?"

"Don't do that!" he warned, his face hardening again. "Let 'em run an' give 'em rope. When th' time comes to snub it, I'll take up th' slack so quick it'll break their necks. It don't do no good to scatter varmints all over th' country: they oughta be rounded up an' jailed."

"Who's goin' to do th' jailin'?" she demanded.

"Why, me—if they'll let me," he answered, bending back the edge of his vest, where once again the deputy badge was pinned. For the last few days it had been in his pocket, safe from prying eyes. His face grew cold again, and the telltale frost crept back into his eyes. "If they don't let me, then it'll save the county money an'

trouble."

"If who don't let you?"

"Th' fellers I'm lookin' for."

He sat down to the table and attacked as good a breakfast as his memory could conjure.

"What happened, last night, in th' bunkhouse?" she asked, putting more bacon on his plate and refilling his cup.

"You won't have no trouble keepin' that spare room occupied," he said, grinning, "when I'm free to use it. Good cookin'

is a wonderful thing, an' I never tasted such coffee. How do you make it?"

"By usin' plenty of coffee. But while I'm gaspin' over th' compliments, I ain't hearin' what happened last night. You can't wiggle out of it, neither."

He laughed, shook his head gently, and told her. She listened in silence, but with mounting indignation and anger.

"An' I got to let them men stay here, workin' for me?" she demanded, her voice cracking like a whip.

"Yes, ma'am; if you want to cure this ranch of what's ailin' it. Suppose you let me do th' firin' when th' time comes?"

She saw the frost creep back into his eyes, and read aright his unconscious gesture, a dropping of his hand toward the holster on his thigh.

"You did some last night an' missed," she accused.

"That wasn't no miss; that was good shootin', right good shootin'," he replied. "You see, I didn't have things figgered out then; an' it might 'a' been an accident."

"Is that deppity's badge belongin' to this county?" she asked, and at his nod, she continued: "How'd you get it so quick? Who gave it to you?"

"Haskins pinned in onto me himself," answered Mesquite.

"How'd he ever come to do that, an' you a stranger?"

"Ma'am, I'm beginnin' to change my mind about that spare room," he said, pushing back from the table. "You ask a lot of questions."

"I notice that I don't get a lot of answers!" she retorted with spirit.

"Trouble is, you ain't askin' th' right person," he said, smiling again. "You want to ask th' sheriff. He can tell you that a lot better than I can."

"You can tell me good enough," she said, and snorted. "Ask John Haskins? Ask that fresh-water clam? Huh! He's as bad as you are." She leaned forward. "Nobody ever accused me of bein' too talkative when harm would come of it."

"Why, ma'am, I helped him find out that Charley Lennox was th' man he wanted. He telegraphed up to Montana about me; an' when he got th' answer, he said I ought to get a job out here. Then he swore me in an' pinned this badge on me. That's all there was to it."

"Seems like it might be enough, if a person knew it all," she replied, looking quickly out of the window to hide her face and eyes. She saw the men leaving the bunkhouse and remembered what was in her pantry.

"Am I to keep them guns?" she asked abruptly.

"Only till I get out of rifle shot, an' I better be startin' now," he said, getting up and going toward the door.

She joined him, and for a moment her old hand rested on his young shoulder; and before he knew it he had placed his own over it, squeezed gently, and then hastened to his horse. Raising his big hat, he wheeled and loped around the corner, heading for Desert Wells.

She stood for a moment as he had left her, then dabbed indignantly at her eyes and glared at the foreman and his companions, who were walking toward her. Unhesitatingly she turned, unlocked the pantry door, and swung it open; and as Rankin started to speak, she waved toward the pantry and whirled out of the room.

Rankin sighed with relief and hastened to get the guns and to leave the house; he had been talked at and to by Mrs. Ricketts before, and he had no desire to repeat the experience.

When Mesquite reached Desert Wells he stopped, as usual, in front of Parsons's Saloon, and found the coroner in his accustomed place in the corner. Mesquite offered to treat, but the hour was too early for the official, and they sat and talked idly, discussing the gossip of the range. Parsons was busy polishing and getting ready for the day's work, and he kept ducking down behind the bar; and Mesquite took advantage of one of these short disappearances to whisper a message in his companion's ear. Corbin nodded and kept right on with his slow talking. After a while he was struck by a new thought and looked curiously at his companion.

"How come you ain't workin'?" he asked curiously.

"Ain't got a job, no more," answered Mesquite. "I'm ridin' on my way ag'in. If I can get back to my old range in Texas, without starvin' on th' way, I'll be all right."

"Why, I reckoned you'd like it out there on th' Lazy S," replied the coroner, in pretended surprise.

"Oh, I liked th' Lazy S, all right, for a couple of minutes," said Mesquite with a

short, unpleasant laugh; "but th' Lazy S didn't like me. We didn't set well together, me an' that outfit; so I quit to keep from bein' fired, an' here I am."

Parsons's ears were open and there was a faint smile on his face, a smile of understanding. He knew a great many things which he kept to himself, for he played no favourites. He could have told the sheriff many things of interest to that official, but he minded his own business and was friendly with everybody; if he had not followed that policy he would have known but little of what went on about him, and his business would have suffered. Every man who knew the proprietor also knew how close his mouth was and trusted him; but Mesquite did not know him, and he took no chances; and the coroner and the sheriff humoured his secrecy. What Parsons was now hearing was meant for him to hear and would do no harm.

"Th' thing that made me quit was Ed Jones cleanin' his Colt," said the puncher. "I was sittin' right in line with th' barrel when it went off, an' it's a wonder I wasn't blowed open. I got mad an' lost my head, an' they got mad at me, an' then I figgered it was time to drift ag'in. They said it was an accident, an' mebby it was; but I don't like them kind of accidents, an' I said so. Anyhow, there ain't room for another man on th' Lazy S. Besides," he said, grinning, and lying for the sake of strategy, "I got a girl back in Texas that I ain't seen for a long time."

The coroner laughed and nodded knowingly.

"I reckon you told th' real reason last," he observed. He winked at Parsons and laughed again.

"They all git it," said the proprietor, "first or last. An' some of 'em git it awful bad. I've seen some mighty level-headed men make fools outa themselves over a woman."

"I ain't makin' no fool outa myself!" retorted Mesquite, bridling.

"I didn't say you was, sonny," placidly replied Parsons. "I was jest makin' a gen'ral observation." He wiped off the bar, and looked up again. "What part of Texas you come from?"

"Panhandle."

"Know Jake Lukins?"

"No; never heard of him; th' Panhandle is considerable big."

"Yes, so it is; but not so big that Jake's name wouldn't be knowed over most of it if he kept on like he was startin' when I saw him last," said Parsons. "I was born down there. Our family moved up from th' coast before th' Injuns an' buffaloes were wiped out. First th' idear was to kill off th' Injuns; an' then somebody figgered that th' Injuns would leave if th' buffaloes were cleaned up; an' it was

considerable easier an' more profitable to clean up buffalers. I helped do that, an' made right good money at it; but until th' 'Dobe Walls fight it was mighty risky business. You been in Dodge City?"

"Yes, passed through it on my way up th' Great Western Trail."

"Huh! Great Western Trail," mused Parsons. "Thought that had petered out long ago, with th' nesters, state laws, an' th' settlements."

Mesquite nodded.

"It's passin'," he said. "They'll be drivin' round th' west end of Kansas, next."

"Reckon so," said Parsons, and he smiled reminiscingly. "Dodge City was a real town, once. When buffaler huntin' kinda petered out I got a job in Dodge, tendin' bar. I've seen some tight times along that railroad track, an' I saw Boot Hill grow right fast. Yes, sir; when Dodge City whooped, she whooped."

"Cheyenne took first place away from Dodge, I reckon; but Ogalalla beat 'em both," said Mesquite, grimly remembering his own experiences.

"Ogalalla only imitated Dodge, an' it wasn't any too good an imitation, at that," replied Parsons, loyal to his old town. "Who do you know in th' Panhandle?"

Mesquite mentioned a number of names, but the proprietor shook his head.

"So Ed Jones's gun went off when he was cleanin' it, huh?" he asked.

"You'd thought so if you'd been sittin' where I was. My ears are still ringin'."

"A feller oughta be more careful," mildly observed Parsons, shaking his head. "All them guns that go off ain't loaded. Well, accidents will happen."

"I ain't right shore, right now, that it was an accident," retorted Mesquite, bridling again.

"No, I don't suppose you are—or ever will be."

"Well, I reckon I'll pull my stakes," said Mesquite, winking at the coroner and slowly standing up. "I got to get me a few cans of grub an' some smokin' tobacco. I'm mighty glad to have met you fellers, an' I may see you ag'in, some day."

"Reckon we'll be right here, or in th' cemetery," replied Parsons. "Allus be glad to see you. Good luck."

"Same to you, Parsons; well, Corbin, so long," said Mesquite, turning to his companion and holding out his hand.

"If yo're goin' down to th' store I'll ride along with you that far," said the coroner, lazily rising. "Us loafers like to make th' rounds."

The two men passed through the door, mounted, and rode slowly through the deep dust of the main street; and Mesquite tersely explained matters as they went along, his companion listening in silence and without much surprise. They

stopped near the sheriff's office, for they had much to say.

"I reckon you figger that outfit right," said the coroner; "they was out to get you. Now what you aimin' to do—keep on ridin'?"

"No," answered Mesquite, and he straightway outlined his plans as well as their vagueness would permit. "I got to get some supplies if I live out in th' hills," he explained as he finished. "If I buy as many as I need it'll show my hand; an', besides, I'm supposed to be broke. I wonder if I gave you th' money, if you an' th' sheriff would buy 'em, get 'em out to me without lettin' anybody know about it?"

"Shore; that'll be easy. How you goin' about this—personal or as a deppity?"

"My feelin's are plumb personal; but if I get th' chance to use my new badge, I'll shore take it. If I run into Charley Lennox I'll mebby save Haskins a job."

"Then you keep yore money right where it is," replied Corbin. "I reckon grubstakin' you will come under th' lawful expenditures of th' sheriff's office; an' if it don't, then th' sheriff's office, or mine, will stand it just th' same."

The coroner rested his hand on his companion's shoulder and looked the youth squarely in the eye.

"Now, Mesquite, I want to tell you somethin'. That wasn't no accident, that gun goin' off like that. Rankin an' his men are bad hombres. Don't make no mistakes about that. If you run into 'em, an' it looks like trouble, don't you take no chances; an' if you do run into 'em it shore will mean trouble. No deppity is supposed to commit suicide, as Haskins would tell you if he was here. Tell 'em to throw up their hands, but don't tell 'em twice, an' don't wait more'n a couple of seconds for 'em to do it. Yo're a deppity; an' if th' other man is dead, he can't dispute yore explanation of how it all happened. Look out for Larry: he's right quick with a gun, an' he's all swelled up with conceit. He wants to put some more notches on th' handles of his gun."

Mesquite nodded and kneed his horse forward, his companion moving with him. They fixed upon a place where the supplies were to be left, and a time; and then stopped before the store and wandered inside.

"Seen Haskins?" asked the coroner of the proprietor.

Sim pushed away from the shelves behind the counter, shook his head in reply to the question, and looked curiously at Mesquite.

"Do anythin' for you?" he asked.

Mesquite named a few items, and when they were placed before him he had to hunt through his pockets to find money enough to pay for them.

"You might put 'em in a sack, if you got one," he suggested. "I'm ridin' with 'em."

"Ain't you th' new man out on th' Lazy S?" asked Sim curiously.

"I ain't, but I was."

"He's got a girl back in th' Panhandle," explained the coroner, grinning. "Then you ain't seen Haskins, Sim?"

"Nope, I ain't. Not to-day, anyhow. Reckon he's lookin' for Charley Lennox."

"No, he ain't no fool," replied the coroner. "Lennox has got to hell an' gone out of th' country."

"Charley is like a fox," commented Sim, rubbing his hands on his soiled apron, an affectation, a sign of his trade. "A fox never does what you reckon he'll do."

"Charley is also a coward," retorted Corbin officially. "An' a coward allus runs true to form. He's a couple of states away, right now, an' mebby still runnin'!"

"Well, he never pestered me, an' I don't care where he is," said Sim, "an' I ain't paid to ketch him, neither. Understand Larry Rankin's goin' to git married an' go with th' Ace of Clubs?"

"Ain't at all shore about him gettin' married; but he's gone with that outfit," said the customer.

"Either one is bad enough," said the coroner. "Well, Sim, if you see Haskins before I do, don't get him all het up. I don't want him particular. I'm just lonesome. So long, Mesquite. Good luck."

They shook hands and the coroner departed.

Mesquite picked up the little sack, ruefully weighed it in his hand, grinned apologetically, and turned away.

"So long," he said perfunctorily.

"So long," echoed Sim, and leaned back against the shelving, lazily watching the youth fix the sack on his horse, mount slowly, and slowly ride away. Then the storekeeper grinned a little and scratched his jaw. "Didn't reckon you'd keep that job very long, stranger," he muttered. "An'," he said decisively, "you didn't!"

CHAPTER 10 - ROUNDABOUT

Desert Wells was situated in the extreme west end of the basin, and lay at the end of the old stage and freighting road which led south and a little east to the old Butterfield Road, where more than a score of years before the coaches of that great organization rocked to and fro from the valley of the Mississippi to the Pacific Coast. They had died with the outbreak of the Civil War; then the Southern Pacific Railroad pushed onward, and ran a line of stages to bridge the steadily shortening gap between the ends of track. Other stage lines sprang into

operation, and short lines fed the main stems. Such a short line connected Desert Wells with the outside world, with semi-weekly service, and its freight wagons ran every other day; but no longer to connect with a stage line: the railroad had taken its place.

The quickest way to Texas for a horseman was along this old road. At El Paso there was a choice of routes for farther progress. Along this feeding road went Mesquite Jenkins, riding as steadily and purposefully as a man would ride who was bound for the far-off Lone Star State. He met the freight wagon when less than twenty miles from Desert Wells, and at mid-afternoon he pulled aside for the inbound stage. He exchanged salutations with the driver of each outfit, smiling inwardly with satisfaction. The news of his departure would soon be general knowledge throughout the basin, and this was the information he wished to have spread about.

The coach had no more than rolled out of his sight before he pulled to the left and forsook the road, riding up the waters of a shallow stream for a few hundred feet. Leaving this, he swung still more to the left and struck as directly as possible for the tableland forming the east end of the basin. He was to meet either the sheriff or the coroner, with his supplies, at the foot of a deep, straight gash in the slope of the plateau, which ran down to the first bench, and which could be seen from all parts of the basin. Night overtook him long before he had reached his destination, and he camped in a little low pasture on the bank of a rill, where his horse could have water and good grazing.

Dawn found him awake, and not long thereafter he was in the saddle again, pushing steadily on his way at a pace which his horse could maintain for hours. A man dependent upon horseflesh is wise if he considers his horse before himself; and Mesquite rode at a lope over the more level stretches, at a walk up the grades, and on the steeper hills he dismounted and walked at the side of his horse. His progress was better than he had hoped for, and once on the tableland he pushed on briskly.

Noon found him on the edge of the basin, gazing out across it, and in a few minutes he had oriented himself and located the slash of the cañon. He now rode back from the rim to avoid being seen from below, and worked his way southward. Late in the afternoon he found himself on the lower bench, at the cañon's mouth, the appointed meeting place.

He picketed his horse back of a fringe of brush, scouted on a wide circle, and returned to the cañon mouth. Dusk was still an hour off when the sounds of a horse reached him, and he hastened around the brush fringe to keep his mount from whinnying. The sounds came steadily nearer and now told him that they

were being made by two horses instead of one; and in a moment the top of a high-crowned sombrero appeared over the crest of a gentle rise to the south, followed by the wrinkled face of Sheriff Haskins and the heads of two horses.

Mesquite called out and stood up, and soon the sheriff stopped at the side of his deputy.

"Figgered mebby you'd git lost," said the sheriff, with a grin.

"Don't get lost as a general thing," replied Mesquite, stepping forward to lend a hand with the pack rope.

"Reckon we'll push on a little before we unload," said the sheriff, easing himself in the saddle.

Mesquite nodded, turned, and in a moment rode back to the officer's side. They pushed on for nearly a mile, winding up the bottoms of two ravines north of the cañon. Rounding a turn they came out on a little pasture in a widening of the ravine, where a small rill trickled down the steeper bank.

"Reckon this looks more like it," said the sheriff, stopping. "It's off any line of ridin', an' nobody would have any business here."

They unloaded the pack animal and stored the supplies in the best place, and then sat down on a rock to smoke and talk. "You goin' back to-night?" asked Mesquite.

"Yep; got to be in plain sight to stop th' tongues a-waggin'," said the sheriff. "If I stay away overnight, everybody in th' basin would learn that Haskins was runnin' a bluff at earnin' his pay, an' out pertendin' to hunt for Charley Lennox." He chuckled grimly. "Haskins is too old an' shiftless to be sheriff. What we need is a young man that will ride hosses to death an' raise a lot of dust along th' trails, lookin' for a man that's put a couple of states between hisself an' th' scene of his killin'. Funny logic, that is: they agree that Charley is three, four hundred miles away; but they also agree that I oughta be ridin' all over th' country a-lookin' for him."

"You figger Lennox has left th' country?" asked Mesquite, somewhat surprised.

The sheriff placed his sombrero at his feet and ruffled his hair.

"No, do you?"

"No."

"Charley's got good friends, a first-class hide-out country, an' all he owns is right here in th' basin," said the sheriff. "Time goes along, an' Charley ain't bothered. Th' hunt dies out, th' sheriff an' his deppities hang 'round Parsons' Saloon, an' purty soon folks forget that old Tobe was murdered. It's only a matter of time till Charley gits careless or too cocksure. Then we'll have a trial an' a

hangin'." He looked sidewise at his companion. "You got any plans all made?"

"No, only a general idea of what I'm figgerin' to do," answered Mesquite slowly. "Yore Charley Lennox is kinda second fiddle with me. I'll pick him up if I run across him, but th' Lazy S comes first, everythin' else bein' equal. I sorta got th' idea, though, that one will lead to th' other; so I'll foller th' best sign that shows up an' play th' hand as th' cards fall."

"You should 'a' shot Ed Jones when his gun went off," reproved the sheriff. "I'm sayin' that personal an' confidential."

"No, I shouldn't 'a' done anything of th' kind," replied Mesquite. "I would 'a' shot him if there hadn't been other things to think about. I didn't want to waste a lot of time settin' in jail an' facin' some fool jury day after day. I had better use for my time."

The sheriff chuckled.

"That's th' worst of bein' a stranger. You wouldn't 'a' set in no jail very long, an' down here folks don't face juries day after day. I reckon between sunrise an' sunset would 'a' been time enough."

"With four men lyin' ag'in' me an' swearin' me into a noose?"

"Well, you got one more feller to pester you," said the sheriff, rising.

"What way do th' Ace of Clubs drive their herds out of th' basin?" asked Mesquite, uncrossing his legs.

"Over th' road, like everybody else."

"They couldn't very well drive a herd out, then, without somebody seein' it?"

"Reckon not."

"An' their drives ain't no bigger than a person would expect a small outfit to make?"

"Nope; they don't have enough for a drive of their own. They gen'rally throw in with some other drive herd an' furnish a man or two."

"That's one of th' most interestin' things I've learned, so far," said Mesquite, lazily rising. The frosty look crept into his eyes and his face grew hard. "You asked me if I had any plan. I hadn't, then; but I have now." He smiled grimly. "I reckon I won't see you for a couple, three weeks, but mebby I'll want to see you about then or before. I wonder if you'd mind comin' here two weeks from now, an' then every week after that, if it's necessary? It might not amount to nothin', an' then, ag'in, it might. Can't tell how it'll work out."

"Somethin' sorta stirrin' under yore scalp, huh?" inquired the sheriff, smiling. "I reckon age ain't crippled me so much that I can't ride up here accordin' to

agreement; an' now it is an agreement. Shall I come alone?"

"Might be better to bring somebody you can trust. We might want to send news back to town," answered Mesquite. His roving glance rested on the supplies. "Reckon I won't starve for that long, anyhow," he chuckled.

"Not unless you got th' nature of a hawg," replied Haskins, swinging into his saddle. He leaned down. "Don't you get so full of idears that you get careless. Charley Lennox is somewhere in this country, an' he's a bang-up shot with a rifle."

"Which fact I discovered before I ever saw Desert Wells," replied Mesquite. "But, then, if he is such a good shot, why did he bungle when he shot at old Tobe? Tobe was three times as close to him as that hoss was."

"Some folks find it a lot different between shootin' at a hoss an' shootin' at a man. I reckon Charley is one of them kind. Charley was shootin' to commit a cold murder; reckon mebby he won't be so jumpy in a reg'lar shootin' affray, man to man. Well, hell with that. So long."

"So long," echoed Mesquite, watching the officer until he had ridden out of sight.

For a moment he stood still, his eyes on the bend of the ravine, but his thoughts were elsewhere. He was certain that Lazy S cattle had been systematically stolen for at least four years; and it was possible that the Box O had been robbed, as well; yet the number of animals in the drive trail herds of the Ace of Clubs had been small, had been in proportion to their total herd. The moment he had been waiting for was now here; the moment when he would have the right and the opportunity to solve the riddles which had stirred his interest. And as an added inducement was the probability that Charley Lennox was hiding out somewhere in these hills.

He turned and looked about him. The supplies had not been cached to his satisfaction, but he had preferred to let the sheriff take care of them after his own ideas; now, however, they would be shifted, and they would be split up. He would leave the larger supply in this vicinity, but the smaller would be cached closer to his field of operations as soon as he learned just where that field was. Dark had fallen, and he was obliged to wait until daylight made the work possible, and he made his few preparations for a night camp.

CHAPTER 11 - MORE DISCOVERIES

There were two ways of going about the business on hand: one of them being to strike along the upper slope of the plateau and follow about the same course he had taken on his previous visit; the other, to ride back on the tableland and

make a wide circle, endeavouring to pick up some outbound trail which was not generally known to the inhabitants of the valley. The latter seemed to be the better plan, since it was upon the existence and use of such a trail that his hypothesis had been formulated. Once learn that such a trail existed, then he had a favourable check on his generalities; and it would then be only a matter of handling the details incidental to whatever rustling was going on.

The reserve supply of food cached to his satisfaction, Mesquite loaded his horse with the remainder, a load too large and heavy to give much pleasure to a rider, and struck eastward up the slope, taking advantage of every bit of cover that offered. By noon he was on the high plateau and beginning the big circle. He rode at a walk, still careful of the condition of his horse; and mile followed mile, hour followed hour, until the day was spent and twilight threatened.

He had found nothing to awaken any quicker interest, and he went into camp before dark; but he did not light his fire until the gathering night would hide its faint streamer of smoke. Of the two evils he preferred the glow of his Indian fire, deep down in a steep-walled depression, to even the faintest gossamer film of smoke in daylight. As yet no suspicions had been awakened in the minds of his foes, and a carefully built and shielded fire was not hazardous.

The following morning found him riding steadily northward on his circle, bearing a little to the west, and keeping to the lower levels. Several times he left his horse and went on foot to the tops of hills, there to lie hatless and to peer out through a screening fringe of brush or grass. While riding, his vision was mostly of short radius, since he followed the lower conformations of the country. This choice was deliberate: he cared little for anything outside of the immediate scene of his progress, except for his occasional wider glimpses. He was looking for a trail to cross the line of his own riding. When he did creep up to the skyline of some higher hill, he benefited by a more comprehensive view, and gained a better knowledge of the lay of the whole country.

On these little expeditions on foot he did not fail to look closely for a sign of rising dust, and he saw many; but they were wind-made and soon told him of that fact. One little trail of dust, progressing in a more or less definite direction, at a more or less constant speed, would perhaps save him hours of riding. Midday came and went without reward, and then from the vantage point of a rocky hill he caught sight of such a sign. It moved southward, and he roughly guessed it to be about one third up from the basin floor; about the level which he had followed on his first visit. This told him nothing that he had not already learned, and he returned to his horse and rode on again.

About two hours later he came to a place where the basin thrust back into the

hills, and where the rim of the plateau bent nearly at right angles, and extended eastward for perhaps half a score of miles; and now his interest leaped and caused him to scan minutely every rod of the valley floor and the surrounding heights. Still there was no sign of a trail, and he was about to return to the horse when a film of dust arose at the very foot of the hill he was on. The maker was hidden from sight by an overhang, a bulge in the hillside; but to the watcher's keen eyes that moving dust meant much.

Its progress was interesting: was it made by some range animal, wandering along, or was it made by a ridden horse? Patience and time would answer that question. Its rate and constancy of progress would tell him what he wanted to know. A loose animal ordinarily will wander about a little as tempting tufts of grass lure it to turn aside and to pause: this moving finger of dust held consistently to one direction, and it moved with a uniform steadiness.

It may be well here to point out that the progress of the rider was not indicated by the actual speed of the dust, but rather by its density, by the way it held its bulk, or thinned and died out as cessation of movement by the maker failed to keep the dust rising. Up on the top of the plateau, especially near and along the rim, the wind had scoured the loose soil and swept it free from dust; down in the basin, where it had sifted from the heights above, it was plentiful.

At last there was movement of something more substantial than dust. A faded black sombrero atop a bay horse moved past a break in the steep hillside, and Mesquite went back to his own horse and rode on again, searching for a good place in which to cache most of his supplies. He was now in the enemy's country, and he believed that he had found the much-wanted trail. Turning, he struck off at the right and went on for a mile or more before he again rode roughly parallel with the rim; and in another mile came squarely against a bar to farther riding in that direction: a steep-walled chasm cut back from the edge of the plateau and forced him to turn to his right again. Before he found a place where he could cross, the afternoon was spent, and again he looked about for a camp site. By the time he had found water and grass it was twilight.

Daybreak found him stirring, and again he made a cache and got rid of most of his remaining supplies. Crossing the cutbank gully which marked the end of the chasm, he pressed across the country on its far side, striking back toward the rim of the plateau at an angle. Once more on the top of the bluff, he saw that the thrust of the basin into the hills had narrowed and was now a cañon. It turned not far from where he was, and was lost to sight; and, smiling with grim exultation, he moved back until he could not be seen by anyone below, and followed on along the rim, from time to time dismounting and creeping to the

edge.

His progress had steadily become more difficult. The side cañons increased in number, at times forcing him to turn and ride for miles to get around them; the country was becoming rockier, wilder, with no water and almost no grazing. The total of his whole day's riding must have been a score of miles, and most of it slow and laborious; but he had progressed, as the crow flies, no more than a fifth of that distance in the direction he wished to go. He began to believe that it would not be long before he would have to discard this roundabout riding, and either make another great circle, or boldly descend into the main cañon at the first available opportunity and let events abide the issue. Finding a little cured grass, he allowed the horse to graze while he sat on a rock and thought the matter out.

There was no issue, as yet, to force. He actually knew nothing that would give him the semblance of an excuse to go down into that cañon and to be found there. Such a situation would defeat his purpose, arousing suspicion and abortive hostility. Keeping himself unseen, his presence unsuspected, was the only way he could hope to be successful; and, hating the inaction, the monotony of endless riding, of constant détours, he nevertheless had to face and endure them all; but to us who read this, they are as uninteresting, as monotonous, and we will step ahead eight days, a boon denied to him. And we, unlike him, do not have to face the last of our rations, and spend four weary days out of the eight in returning to our cache for a new and bigger supply of food, and in riding back again.

From his vantage point Mesquite looked down into the valley. The bluff he was on was the only thrusting height, the only steeply rising hill on the valley's rim, the only place where its floor met a wall of rock. For nine tenths of its circumference it sloped easily to a gentle crest, and gently fell away again. A large stream, large for that part of the country, was divided into two channels at the upper end: One of them tumbled down a rock-strewn rapids to form a pool at the bottom and thence to wander lazily along a twisting course down the valley to the ravine which let it out at the eastern end; the other, branching off above an island at the upper end of the rapids, pitched down over a low ledge and followed a course that led along the northern side of the valley, considerably higher than the bed of the main stream, and from time to time trickles and rills found their way down the intervening slope and into the main branch. The upper stream ran perhaps half the length of the valley before its water, reduced now to a rivulet, flowed down to the main branch. Here was a natural irrigation ditch, and the small rills which spilled down the slope made a pasture as rich in grass as it was vivid in colour. The effect was in no way lessened by the gleam of the sun on the maze of watercourses, which laced the green with threads of silver.

More or less of this he saw at a glance, but whatever it might mean to an artistic eye was second to what it meant to a practical one: cattle grazed over the whole depression, and those near enough for their brands to be read bore the mark of the Ace of Clubs.

Geographically, his quest of discovery was largely ended. There still remained a cattle trail to be located, but this would be an easy matter since one of its terminals had been found. He had found the impounded headwaters, as it were, of a little cattle stream; where that stream flowed was of secondary consideration.

He inched forward toward the edge of the bluff, his sombrero off; and, peering over cautiously through a fringe of scanty vegetation, he looked down. Almost squarely below him was the roof of a hut, and on its right, close at hand, was a rough corral. A spring burst from the base of the bluff at the left of the hut and trickled down the slope of the bench.

There was no sign of human occupancy either in the hut or in the valley. Several horses grazed along the main creek, and the corral was empty. Now he examined the whole valley with deliberation, and found a thread winding westward up and over the little rise which lay between the cañon and the valley; this was the trail connecting the Ace of Clubs headquarters with their hidden range. His gaze slowly swept across and down the valley, and paused to settle on another thread winding its way over the upward slope at the east end until it struck the bushy growths near the crest, where it twisted through natural openings and bore off in a more northerly direction. This, then, must be the outlet, the trail over which the fattened cattle reached the outside world and a market value.

He might have arisen and retreated carelessly, since there was no sign of any human being but himself; but there was in him an inherited caution, a caution originally engendered by a generation of Mountain Utes long since gone to their Happy Hunting Ground. They had instilled it, along with patience, into his own father while that father had been a child. He had grown to manhood with the tribe, and had been educated in the Indian's way. It had become his nature, for when he had escaped and returned to the white settlements he was Indian in those attributes which to the Indian are most important; he had to learn the white man's ways, and to the day of his death the imprint of his savage education was a virile factor. To his son he had passed on as much of this as he could, passed on the better part of it; and he had found that son an apt pupil.

Mesquite wriggled backward, slowly reached out and picked up his hat, and kept on wriggling until it was safe to proceed on hands and knees, and finally on foot. Which was the safest place for him to stay, the place least likely to be visited

by the cattle thieves who used this valley? Right where he was, almost on top of their cabin. On the other hand, it was the highest point around the valley's rim, and it might be used for a watch point. Therefore it was either the best, or the worst. If it were a matter for guessing he could guess either way and take an even break; but there was no need to guess; if it was a watch point it would have been used, and if it had been used there would be signs to tell about it.

Leading his horse for a dozen rods, he mounted and rode toward a rougher part of the slope forming the rear of the bluff, and found what he was looking for. This was a ravine, deep down in the earth and masked somewhat by brush along its rims. It led, deviously, to a sunken pasture where there was grass enough for his horse and where a crude shelter could be built for himself. Everything else being equal, he had found an ideal hiding place, and one with water trickling through it.

Now he turned his horse about and began another of his useful circles. In an hour he found that his hopes were justified: nowhere were there any tracks but those made by himself and his own horse. The bluff was not used as a watch point by the Ace of Clubs outfit or its friends; and this led, logically, to the belief that they felt secure and were not suspicious of espionage. He smiled with satisfaction: he had been amply paid for his efforts. He had found what he had set out to find, and so far his chain of reasoning had been proved to be correct.

Returning to the ravine he built a shelter of brush, weaving branches together into a wickiup, and over this he fastened his second and poorer blanket. This was home, almost in the cattle thieves' back yard. Cattle thieves they were, to the best of his belief, but belief and proof are two different things, and he had to establish proof. Further than that, if he was to solve the vexatious questions concerning the state of health of the Lazy S, he had to connect these men and their stealing squarely with the outfit of the Lazy S. But before he could do that, before the march of events forbade him leaving the scene, while there were no activities going on in this valley, and therefore while there was nothing else to do or anything for him to miss, he had to return to the place where he had met the sheriff and bring back the new supplies.

To go back along his outbound trail was both needless and too far. He would strike across the chord of that arc, and cover the distance in half the time or less, since the riding would be unhampered by the thrust of the lateral cañons. So, taking a good look around, and finding the highest part of the northeastern skyline and fixing this in his memory, he mounted and struck as directly as he could for his destination. At short intervals he turned in his saddle and studied the country behind him, as a necessary aid for a direct and unhesitant return. The

aspect of a country along a trail changes with the direction pursued, and the wise man provides himself with mental photographs for guidance on his return journey, pictures of the landscape viewed from the opposite direction.

His judgment in the value of the short cut was justified, for he arrived at the bottom of the big slash in the basin's rim in less than a third of the time it had taken him to make the outbound journey; and he found the sheriff patiently waiting for him, seated on a rock beside a pile of supplies. The officer smiled and recrossed his legs.

"I was a mite ahead of time," he confessed. "Got here yesterday, an' th' first thing I know I'll have a reputation for sheriffin'."

"Glad to see you," replied Mesquite, swinging down. "Got some food left, but I want to stock up while I've got time for it. Reckon I'll be too busy to waste five, six days luggin' in grub."

The sheriff raised his faded eyebrows.

"Five, six days?" he inquired curiously.

"Yes, round trip."

"Find somethin'?"

"Yes."

"Want any help?"

"No; not any direct help," answered Mesquite; "but I'll mebby need some at a distance. An', besides, this is too far to come for supplies. It takes too much of my time. You reckon you could push on a couple days farther, next time?"

"Reckon so, but I don't like to be missin' that long. Start folks thinkin', an' it ain't good for 'em to think too much. Allus makes a lot of trouble."

"Who's a good deppity, then?"

"Bill Tucker."

"Keep his mouth shut?"

"An' his eyes open," chuckled the sheriff. "If a man was to ask Bill what day of th' week it was, Bill would think it over right cautious before he gave any information; an' then he might name th' wrong day to see what would happen. Folks figger he's dumb; an' so he is, on th' face of it. Actin' dumb is a valuable asset in our business."

Mesquite laughed somewhat guiltily, for he had seen Bill Tucker in Parsons's Saloon and been struck by the man's almost bovine mentality. Even now he was a little suspicious of the sheriff's appraisal of his deputy.

"You ain't lettin' yore likin' for Bill run up his tally, are you?"

"Not a mite," answered the sheriff. "Bill's right smart, inside; an' he does what he's told. You can count on him."

"Well, I hope so. Then why not let him disappear from town when th' next load of supplies are due? Make it one week instead of two. I got a feelin' that somethin's goin' to break about then. Let him bring them in to—to—" Mesquite paused, searching for words with which to paint the picture adequately. He shook his head impatiently. "Here! I can talk better with my hands." He leaned over and traced a rough map on the ground, explaining it as it grew. "There," he finally said, his finger resting on the intersection of two lines. "That's th' place. Reckon Bill can find it?"

"Reckon he can," answered the sheriff. "Wait!" he exclaimed, as Mesquite's hand swept down to obliterate the map. "Let me look at it a little longer, while you pack them supplies onto yore cayuse. You'll find most of 'em can be et without cookin'. Smoke an' fire are a damn nuisance, sometimes."

"I meant to ask for that kind of grub but forgot to," answered Mesquite, turning to the pile.

Some minutes later the sheriff wiped out the map, dusted it over with a sprig of sage, and stood up.

"One week from to-day," he said, "you'll find Bill there. He'll wait till you come, an' he'll stay if you want him to. I'll tell him that yo're his boss." He turned toward his horse. "Anythin' else on yore mind, before I leave?"

"No, not a thing. One week from to-day it is. Much obliged, Haskins. I kind of figger that th' sheriff of this county is goin' to surprise folks right smart purty soon."

The sheriff looked closely at his companion and appeared to be a little frightened.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "That won't do! If I've got any light under a bushel, I shore don't want th' basket lifted!"

"Well, I don't want my basket lifted, neither, if I can help it," replied Mesquite quickly. "Somebody will have to get th' credit, an' it ain't goin' to be me. I aim to be that careless, fool puncher of th' Lazy S after this is all cleared up. I'll be worth twice as much to th' ranch, that way."

"Well, this talk of ourn has taken a kinda serious bend," said the sheriff, scratching his head. "I don't see how you can keep out of it, a-tall; an' I'm right shore I don't want to get into it. Tell you what!" he ejaculated, a broad grin slipping over his face, "We'll let Jim Conover win th' medal. Jim's right smart, an' everybody knows it. But he'll have to quit hangin' out round town, if he's to get

th' credit. I'll send him instead of Bill, an' tell him to make camp where he meets you, an' to stay there unless you want his help. That'll let us both out."

"Jim's th' man you sent over to talk to th' blacksmith at Franklin, to find out about that busted hoss-shoe, ain't he?"

"Yes, that was Jim."

"Well, all right; I'll have a lot to tell you when I see you ag'in," said Mesquite, carefully climbing into his saddle so as not to disturb the packs.

"You look like a—like a—damn' if I know what you *do* look like," said the sheriff, grinning at the packs. "Travellin' grocery store, I reckon."

"Feel like one, too," said Mesquite, wheeling. "Well, so long."

"So long," echoed the sheriff.

CHAPTER 12 - THE LOST IS FOUND

Mesquite, reaching his hide-out, cached the supplies and mounted again. He struck out on a circle which led him well back from the rim of the valley and around its southern side. When he came to the trail leading out of it to the east he began to ride in a peculiar manner.

As soon as the trail came into sight he rode erratically, pushing on in a zigzag course from one tuft of grass to the next, straying hither and yon, and never at anything but a walk. At the trail's edge was a gnarled, twisted tree. One dead limb pushed out at about the height of a horse's back from the ground, and just beyond it was a tuft of grass.

The rider smiled, threw himself out of the saddle and down on the side of the horse, and headed the animal under the limb straight for the grass. A loose horse would have done that if its fancy directed; but the low limb would have been a bar to a mounted man, sitting up in his saddle; and a mounted man would have ridden several feet more to the left if he wished to ride on in that general direction. A horseman cannot travel over ordinary ground, especially if his horse is shod, without making tracks; but if there is need for caution, a wise horseman will do what he can to make the tracks innocent and above suspicion.

Crossing the trail, he rode on, still zigzagging for his horse to graze as it progressed, as all loose animals would, until he had crossed the crest of a little rise; and then he rode forward at a lope on a course roughly paralleling the trail. After several miles he forsook it altogether and turned to continue the circle. He had found indications that it had been used for a cattle trail, but the signs were so old that he knew that no cattle had passed over it since spring. Whatever cattle had been stolen since then were still on the range and could be recovered when

the time came. They were not lost to their owners.

As he pushed on around the valley he began to see cattle, and their numbers increased as he progressed. They all bore the Ace of Clubs brand, and to these marks he gave close attention.

For years the Lazy S had used stamping irons, and the brands were impressed instead of being drawn. This meant not only uniformity in design, but uniformity in size. The Ace of Clubs used the old running iron, and its brands were drawn free-hand, instead of being impressed, and no two men made the same mark; indeed, one man did not make two marks exactly the same. As there is in handwriting, so there was here, in lesser degree, certain characteristics in the various marks which would tell a man familiar with them just what puncher was most likely to have made them. But Mesquite was not interested in the latter: his curiosity was centred on the types of brands, the small and regular and the large and irregular. Any of the former found out here would tell its own story.

He dipped down into a draw, where the vegetation grew thicker and afforded shelter and scratching for cattle. As he went down into it, there was a swift rustling and crashing, and four cows pushed through the brush and started up the other side.

He went after them and soon overtook them on their branded side. The marks were small and identical on the greater part of the two side loops; but in no two cases were the upper loops the same, and the upper right-hand line which connected the two lower loops in all cases was irregular. This was another answer that he had set out to find: these four animals had been stolen after the Lazy S had branded them. The open loops of the prostrate S had been closed and the letter made into a lazy 8. Rising from the middle of this was the third loop, which had been added at a later date, and made with a running iron. The stem had been drawn at the same time in the same way. Here were four altered brands, four brands which to a jury of cattlemen would be evidence sufficient for conviction. The animals were three-year-olds.

He continued on the circle, now riding in a northwesterly direction, and saw many cattle. In every event the animals bore the same kind of brand, in every event they were stolen animals. Not one cow or steer bore the larger, rougher mark which was used by the Ace of Clubs on its own cattle.

This valley, then, was the especial range for the stolen stock, where the animals grew fatter, attained the best market age, and were held until sufficient numbers warranted a drive. The Ace of Clubs had so few of its own animals that it kept them on the home range to make as great a showing as possible and to give them the opportunity to make a round-up twice a year, a round-up that was hardly

more than a gesture.

He had found the source of the stolen animals, their private and secret range, and the beginning of the trail over which they were driven to market. Later, perhaps, when he had the time, he would follow that trail and find out where it led. It could hardly swing south far enough to join the regular road out of the basin and Desert Wells; and, therefore, it did not join the stage and wagon road, and if it did not, then it must lead to a different purchaser, a purchaser who bought nothing from the Ace of Clubs but the cattle bearing the altered brands.

He turned this thought over in his mind, and it began to grow, to offer rare opportunities, and one of them was so pleasing that Mesquite chuckled, and for a moment a smile came to his face. Here, perhaps, was the lead to as interesting a situation as he ever had known; and it was a lead that he could not afford to overlook. He might be able to get back some of the value of previous herds. He had no doubts, now, about the rehabilitation of the Lazy S.

He had worked his way up to the west end of the valley, still out of it and across its bounding rim. He was drawing near to the point where the cañon and the little river entered it, where the trail came in from the basin; and as he rode slowly and carefully along he thought he could see another dust cloud below and west of him. Dismounting, he left his horse and pushed ahead on foot, to keep down any dust cloud of his own.

A horseman pushed out of the cañon and rode at a gentle lope along the faint trail. He was too far away to be identified, and identification was not yet of moment. Mesquite watched the rider as he swung down the valley, and saw him reach the hut and dismount before it. The distant man made two trips into the building, carrying packets from his horse. Then he mounted and rode on again toward the far end of the valley.

"You'll cut my trail," muttered Mesquite, grinning; "but unless yo're as suspicious as I am, it won't mean anythin' to you. If you are as suspicious, then you'll foller it for a ways. Hum!"

He walked slowly back to his horse, thinking deeply, and paused beside it.

"If yo're Charley Lennox," he mused, "then you will be suspicious of any fresh tracks. An' if you foller 'em until they straighten out an' become th' kind made by a ridden horse, then there'll be some stalkin', an' you'll itch to use that rifle. Th' sheriff reckons you wobble a little when you shoot at a man; but there's a difference in that. You might wobble when yo're shootin' at a man's back, a man who ain't botherin' you; but shootin' at th' man that made them tracks in a valley full of stolen cattle is different. If you find out that there's a stranger snooin'

around, in here, you'll be ready to shoot, an' you'll shoot straight. I aim to be ready an' waitin' for you."

He mounted and swung the horse around, and rode back the way he had come.

"Anyhow, it'll mebby be better to start whittlin' down that gang one at a time. If that feller reads my sign, he don't have to foller it to make trouble for me. All he has to do is get back to his friends an' tell 'em about it. Then I'll have my work cut out for me. All right, Charley, if it's you: you'll find out that there's a hell of a lot of difference between gunnin' for an old man who didn't know anythin' about it an' a man that's waitin' for you to show up over th' sights. Thanks to a good friend, I ain't no slouch with a rifle; an' mebby I know some tricks you ain't never heard of."

He swung from the trail at the first depression and followed the lower ground until he had put sufficient distance between his old course and his new; and then he rode along parallel with the old for several miles. Reaching another depression, he dismounted, tied the horse to a bush, and, taking the rifle from its long scabbard, walked straight for a little knoll at the side of his outbound trail. Here he settled down to wait, his head masked by a fringe of grass and brush.

Time passed slowly, but he was not impatient; he had all the time he wanted. The sun moved to the meridian, and across it, and started down. There was movement at the eastern end of the valley. At that distance the watcher could not tell just what made it, aside from a small, moving dot. It drew slowly but steadily nearer, grew larger and plainer to sight, and finally resolved itself into a horseman. He was coming along at a lazy lope, rocking over the trail with a nonchalance which bespoke an unsuspicious mind. Reaching the hut he dismounted, corraled his horse, and disappeared into the building; and in a few moments smoke poured out of the rickety chimney.

"Good for you," grunted Mesquite. "Eat yore fill, an' get fatter in th' head than you are now. You don't look like my description of Charley Lennox, though it's too far to be sure. If you hang around that shack this afternoon, I'm goin' to have a good look at you."

Returning to his horse he was soon riding back around the circle; and when he neared the outbound cattle trail, he repeated his careful false sign making, crossed the dusty track, and wandered on from grass tuft to grass tuft until it was safe to go ahead on a straight course.

Back on the bluff once more, he picketed the horse down in the ravine, took two cans of food, and went to the lookout point directly over the hut; and while he watched it he slowly emptied the cans and put them in his pocket.

By this time the smoke had died out of the chimney, but the horse was still in the corral. Undisturbed cattle ranged over the valley placidly grazing, and the rays of the sun were throwing long shadows. Below him there was a sudden movement. A man emerged from the hut, stretched enthusiastically, and rubbed at his eyes. He carried his hat in his hand, and he wandered a few paces from the door, looking out over the valley. What he saw could not fail to reassure him, if he needed reassurance. His gaze wandered along the rim of the valley, following it closely and slowly, and at last his face began to turn toward the watcher above.

Mesquite instinctively flattened, and pushed back a fraction of an inch. He knew that human eyes could not detect him through that screen of vegetation, but the caution was instinctive. He knew, too, that a fixed stare arouses some unknown unnumbered sense; and in deference to this he kept constantly shifting his eyes but never entirely lost sight of the man below; and then that man's gaze reached and passed Mesquite's vantage point, moving on along the top of the bluff without the slightest pause. Mesquite chuckled for two reasons: had he kept his eyes steadily on the man below, the other would have paused for an instant when his gaze reached that fringe of grass. He had seen it happen too many times to have any doubt about it. The second reason for the chuckle was the man's identity: to the best of his knowledge and belief, Charley Lennox stood below him.

An officer of the law might have made a fool of himself and taken quick measures toward the apprehension of Charley; but while Mesquite was an officer of the law in actuality, he was hardly one in spirit at that moment. He had told the sheriff that Charley was a second fiddle; and Charley's rating, in his mind, had not changed. Now he could get Charley almost at will, since he knew part of the murderer's range; but in Mesquite's mind there were more important things than the arrest of Charley Lennox; and, besides, Charley would be taken when the right moment came.

So the murderer calmly searched the encircling rim of the valley in the placidity of perfect security; while above him a deputy sheriff looked interestedly downward, an ironic, cold grin on his tanned face.

Charley yawned and stretched again. His little nap had made him temporarily lethargic; its effects had not yet worn off. Again he stretched, showed a returning energy, put on the sombrero, and started briskly for the corral; and in a few moments was astride his horse and riding up the valley toward the Ace of Clubs' legitimate range.

Mesquite waited until the moving bulk had shrunk to that size where definition is lost, and then he arose, keeping behind cover, and went along the bluff, searching for a way down. At last he found it, a series of rocky ledges; and when

he reached the bottom he was not a hundred paces from the hut. Directly over the hut was a ledge four or five feet wide and a dozen paces long, and he had studied this from time to time during his descent. This ledge could be gained easily from the course he had followed, and the knowledge brought a smile to his face. It was made to order for him. He could at any time after dark work down the face of the bluff, gain this ledge, and be within twenty feet of the cabin's rear wall, and never once make a boot print on the ground near the building.

The hut, itself, was crude and full of cracks. Some of them had been stuffed with crumpled paper, discarded shirts, and other wearing apparel; in it there were six rough bunks, in tiers. An old stove, cracked, battered, held together by wire, and supported at two corners by stones in lieu of iron legs, stood dangerously near the wall. A table made of unmatched boards nailed on the ends of boxes stood against an end wall; and on the shelves, here and there, were piles of canned food. A tin box held flour, a crock was half full of beans. The bunks were filled with grass, ready for blankets; but the grass was flattened and should have been changed months before.

Mesquite walked along the rear wall, examining it carefully, and found a place where the stuffing had all but fallen from a crack. He pulled it out and pushed it well into another crack, and by so doing made a peek hole and a good listening place. There were no windows in the rear wall, and this pleased him, for it gave him assurance that no light would stream out and threaten to expose him when he lay on the ledge.

Moving outside, he looked about the bench, and close at hand, hidden from above by a bulge in the wall of the bluff, he found several posts set in the ground, and signs of old fires. Did they do their rebranding here instead of nearer home? It would be much safer to do it in this valley, and they could do it at any time and at leisure.

As he went back toward the hut he glanced at the ground and found that he had made no tracks; the earth was almost as hard as rock, and eddies of wind kept it free from dust. Satisfied that there were no signs of his visit, he climbed up the bluff and reached his camp in time to build a fire for the sake of hot coffee and hot food.

CHAPTER 13 - THREATS AND DISSENSIONS

Mesquite had his breakfast, and not much later he crept up to his vantage point for a look around the valley. To his surprise a cavalcade was entering it from the direction of the cañon. A herd of a score of horses led the way, followed by a rider. Behind him came five horses loaded with supplies and personal effects, in

turn followed by another rider.

He made one guess as to the purpose of this party, and did not need to make two: preparations were under way for a round-up, and perhaps a drive.

Here was an issue, indeed. If a round-up was run in the valley and a herd started over the trail, then there would be no hope of the Lazy S recovering any of those cows. They would be a dead loss. The answer was obvious: the cattle must not be allowed to leave the valley. This task was his, and it was hardly a one-man job; but while he could get help he hated to ask for it, especially when so much would have to be taken on his word at the beginning. He compressed his lips and determined to do the task himself.

Lying prone, peering through the fringes of grass and weeds, he watched the procession move toward him. After it was well into the valley proper, the horse herd was left to stray toward the tempting grazing along the valley's bottom, where it could be had when needed by the wrangler for each day's work. The first man now fell back and joined his companion, and the outfit kept on at a lazy walk toward the cabin. Reaching their destination the men dismounted and began to unload the pack animals, carrying the supplies into the house. It did not take them long to get the work done, their mounts unsaddled and in the corral.

Their identities, although their hats completely hid their faces, was no puzzle to Mesquite. Pecos Sam could be recognized from any angle, and his companion was the man who had visited the hut the day before, when he evidently had been bound on a scouting expedition over the drive trail. Pecos Sam and Charley Lennox were making themselves at home almost under his nose.

An hour passed with no happening of moment, and then a tenuous dust cloud began to take form and to thicken in the west end of the valley near the cañon. From its spread it could hardly be made by another small party, even with another cavvy of horses. Mesquite watched it with deep interest, and was soon rewarded by seeing a herd of cattle slowly top a rise and move deliberately down the east slope. Three men were with the herd, riding slowly behind it, and as soon as the animals started purposefully for the green grass along the bottom and the creek, two of the riders raised their hands to the third and headed for the hut. The third man rode on with the cattle, on their right, and when they stopped to graze and drink he took up a position between them and the rest of the valley, to keep them from wandering in that direction.

This herd, then, for some reason, was to be kept separate from the cattle already in the valley. For one reason, it probably had been cut out and was now ready to go over the trail with the cut from the others; and to let it scatter and get mixed with the other animals would be only to cut it out again. On the other

hand, it might be made up of cattle not yet rebranded.

Mesquite dismissed it from his mind and watched the two nearing riders. They reached the hut and were met by their two friends, exchanged casual talk, and unsaddled.

"You wranglin' any fresh hoss meat to-day, Charley?" asked one of them, pausing as he turned to face the corral.

"What's th' matter with them you've got?" asked Charley. "Thought we wasn't goin' to work 'em to-day, after th' way we worked yesterday."

"Th' way *who* worked yesterday?" asked Number Two sarcastically. "Seems like we missed you early in th' day."

"Yeah," said Number One, "we shore did. I was goin' to ask you about it before. Where'd you go to?"

"You know why I didn't stay around there!" retorted Charley. "You seem to forget that I got a neck an' that it can be stretched as easy as any other."

"Well," sighed Number Two, "there's allus a silver linin' in every black cloud. That neck of yours shore has kept you out of a hell of a lot of hot an' dusty work. You reckon it'll be safe to show yoreself here in th' valley?"

"It'll be safer for me than for you, Bull, if you start ridin' me!"

"Hell, I ain't ridin' you, an' I ain't worryin', neither," replied Bully Tompkins, looking squarely into the eyes of the murderer. "You made a mistake, Charley," he said, changing the subject. "We are goin' to start workin' that bunch to-day. That bein' so, we'll need fresh cayuses. It's yore job to git 'em."

Bull slipped the bridle from his horse, slapped the animal resoundingly, and stepped away as it kicked.

"Turn yourn loose, too, Al," he said. "We're goin' to have fresh ones, an' Charley's goin' to git 'em."

Pecos Sam slouched from the wall and started toward the corral.

"Little hot-iron work?" he asked.

"Yes, an' everybody's in it, cook, wrangler an' all," replied Bull. "You can turn yourn loose, too; we might as well all start even."

Pecos considered as he paused, and swung around to return to the wall, a scowl on his face.

"Let him stay there till Charley goes after th' fresh ones," he said, and paused again, to turn slowly and look at the boss. "Th' harder th' cook works, th' worse he cooks," he said, and moved on again.

"Then you must be plumb worked to death all th' time," laughed Al Lennox.

"Never mind, Pecos: you allus quit in plenty of time to get th' fire goin' an' th' grub under way."

"I notice you said 'plenty,'" chuckled Bull.

"An' I notice you eat plenty!" growled Pecos, regaining the wall.

Mesquite listened to the conversation and watched the movements of the gang until noon, and then he slipped back and went to his camp for another meal out of cans. When he returned to the edge of the bluff he saw Al Lennox riding off to relieve the man with the herd, whom he believed to be Larry Rankin.

Larry Rankin it was, and the youth lost no time in unsaddling. He was hungry, and he popped into the hut without loss of time. As he went in Charley Lennox came out, went to the corral, and soon rode down the bench, driving Pecos's horse ahead of him.

Mesquite watched the wrangler get his horses together and drive them to the corral. Not long thereafter the whole crowd was in the saddle and riding toward the segregated herd. They bunched it a little closer and started it toward the hut, drifting it slowly; and at last checked it not far from the bottom of the bluff, and became busy in earnest.

Mesquite could see the herd and the animals as they left it and were driven in toward the branding fires, whose smoke was all that the watcher could see of them. He could see the rebranded cattle leave for the freedom of the valley, each in a manner peculiar to its own nature; but most of them were moving with plenty of animation, slowing only to lick the burns; but everything else was hidden by the bulge in the side of the bluff.

The celerity and expedition of these thieves when it came to rebranding spoke well for their experience at it; and not a changed brand that Mesquite could see was a poor job. Dust and bawling, curses and laughter arose all afternoon; and then the last animal was driven in, and shortly released to lumber down the slope in panic and to run halfway to the creek before it stopped.

Pecos Sam was the first man to approach the cabin, and smoke arose from the chimney a few minutes afterward. The others appeared a little later, stripped the gear from their horses and watched Charley drive the bunch before him. When he returned with the night horses his companions were not in sight, and the noise of cutlery and dishes served as a spur to speed. Mesquite wriggled backward to go to his camp, mentally debating which cans he would favour.

Before night shut down he was back again on the edge of the bluff, waiting for darkness to let him work down to the ledge behind and just above the cabin.

Here was a nice party: one murderer; one ambitious gun expert, itching to add

new notches to the handle of his gun; and three cattle thieves of the common variety, all bound together by mutual needs, profits, and security. Five frontier toughs making ready to round up, cut out, and drive off the best of the cattle in and around the valley, and every animal a stolen one. Not satisfied with bringing the Lazy S to the verge of bankruptcy through their thefts, one of them had not been satisfied until he had murdered, for real or fancied grievances, its owner; and in that murder had widowed an old woman and placed her face to face with poverty.

Mesquite stirred ominously and relaxed again, and his hand moved to the nickel-plated star inside his vest, but it moved reluctantly. Once again he was faced by that old animosity against the law; once again he hungered to take the law into his own hands and to play three parts in one: judge, jury, and executioner. But this time it was easier than before; and when the moon lighted the face of the cliff to show him the way down, he was as much a deputy sheriff as he ever would be.

The mumble of conversation ran on endlessly and served him well when he dislodged a stone that fell with a clatter. He cursed himself under his breath and froze against the wall, squeezing into a crack; but his alarm was needless, and after a few moments he went on again with redoubled caution. The voices grew steadily plainer, each becoming an intelligible unit in the general talk, but he made no attempt to listen while he worked downward: all his attention was needed on his hands and feet. He reached the coveted ledge and moved silently along it, ready to drop instantly at the first alarm. When opposite the crack in the wall which he had unpacked the afternoon before, he settled down to listen.

"Yes!" snarled a voice which sounded like that of Charley Lennox. "That's what you say now, but if it wasn't for me, old Tobe would be searchin' these hills with a posse behind his back! He was gettin' all ribbed up to ask th' sheriff for help. Hell of a note that would 'a' been! You make me sick, Bull!"

"Have we got to listen to all this wranglin' over ag'in?" wearily asked Pecos Sam. "It had to be done, an' Charley did it. Shut up about it an' play cards! How many you drawin', Al?"

"Damn if I know!" snapped Al Lennox. "With all this arguin' goin' on I don't hardly know where I am. Shut up is right! Here—wait a minute: all right, gimme three."

"Two here," said Larry Rankin. "Make 'em Jacks, Sam, will you?"

"To go with th' three you got?" asked the dealer, grinning. "Huh, Larry: you never want to hold up a sider, except when you do. There's yore Jacks."

"I know all about *that*," growled Bully Tompkins; "but, just th' same——"

"Shut up!" yelled Pecos, banging the table with a big bony fist.

"Oh, all right," said Bull. "Anythin' to please a bunch of damn fools. Wait a minute, Pecos: reckon these will do."

"You better throw away th' extra card," suggested Pecos, grinning. "Two pairs have dug many a man's grave an' changed th' style of many a man's rig."

"Never play 'em, myself, after th' draw," grunted Bull, "except when I figger they'll win."

"You needn't give me no cards, neither," said Charley Lennox with a curse. He threw his hand into the discard and reached for tobacco and papers.

"All right, Charley," said Pecos Sam. "Suit yoreself, but if I was you I'd draw five cards to a full house. That's what I'm goin' to do."

"Do it, then. Yore ante's in an' it won't cost you nothin'. In th' last three hands I've had twenty-one cards an' not even a pair of sevens in th' whole bunch."

"I'm with you, Charley," said Al. "We're shore brothers in hard luck to-night. When they run like this a feller might just as well quit. If he gits a pair ag'in' a pair, his will be th' smallest; if he gits three queens by accident, he runs up ag'in' three kings. Now, with th' cattle game it's different. We oughta do right well, this time. Couple more years an' we won't have to work a-tall, unless we play poker with this gang."

"Ah, hell!" snorted Charley. "There's too many cuttin' in on this. What we oughta do is run th' whole thing ourselves, 'stead of splittin' up with so many."

"Then where'd you git th' cattle?" inquired Larry Rankin with great interest.

"Git 'em where th' others git 'em. Take 'em!" snapped Charley.

Larry's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah?" he gently asked. "You'd mebby find it one hell of a big job."

"Two bits more," said Bull, the man with the pat hand. "Hell, Larry, jobs like that don't bother Charley none, not as long as he's got a rifle an' lots of cover to use it in."

"Just a little more of that, Tompkins!" warned Charley, his voice trembling with anger. He had been ridden so hard about the killing of Tobe Ricketts that his nerves were getting raw.

"Aw, shut up, Bull!" reproved the dealer. "You said two bits more? An' you had a pat hand. Now ain't that wonderful. I drew five cards to a full house, like I said I was goin' to, an' so here's yore two bits, with two bits more to say that my full is better than yourn."

Bull studied the dealer's bland face, threw in a coin, and spread his hand.

"That's a call. What you got?"

"Eight full," said Pecos, his hand reaching out for the pot. He chuckled. "You allus make a funny motion when you fake a pat hand, Bull; but what that motion is I won't tell you. Also, you play two pairs too strong."

"Too strong ag'in a five-card draw?" asked Bull, his voice rising.

"You fellers goin' in after th' rest, to-morrow?" asked Larry.

"Yes," answered Bull. "If that crowd had any sense we could 'a' got 'em all with one drive."

"They couldn't help it," replied Larry. "It took 'em longer to clean out that brush over west than they figured on, an' they couldn't go at it while that new man was in th' outfit. There was more stuff in there than they thought. All mavericks an' all first class. As fine a bunch of slick ears as I ever saw."

Mesquite smiled. That must be the brushy depression which lay parallel with the line he had ridden, the bushy valley he had searched.

"I'm not goin'," said Charley quietly but flatly.

"But it'll take all of us to work 'em through th' brush an' rough country!" expostulated Larry.

"I'm not goin' back into that damn basin," asserted Charley, more specifically. "Pecos will ride my trick, an' I'll stay here, keep an eye on this place, an' play cook."

"Suits me," grunted Pecos. "I'd rather do that than have a lot of wranglin' goin' on all th' time. An' we can't blame Charley. Haskins is sleepin', but he sleeps like a dog, with one eye open; an' one of these days he'll wake up right in front of Charley with both eyes open an' his gun out. He can't fool me. I know that old — — —."

"Well, if Pecos is satisfied, I reckon th' rest of us oughta be," growled Bull. He turned and looked at the fugitive. "You figger on slidin' out of that trail job, too?"

"Look here, Bull!" retorted Charley, his face paling with anger. "You know damn well that I ain't slidin' out of nothin'. I've allus done my part an' run my risks with th' rest of you. But as long as yo're gettin' so damn nasty about it, I'll tell you here an' now that I ain't goin' out with th' herd. An' if you don't like it, you know what you can do, an' you can do it right now, if you've got th' guts!"

"Here, here!" yelled Pecos, his big hand streaking to Charley's wrist.

"Steady, Bull!" warned Larry, staring at the boss through half-closed lids. "Don't you!"

"I can see where I'll be quittin' this outfit," said Charley, his voice tense. There was no humour in his statement, no humour in the hut; but to the man on the ledge something must have been very humorous, for his silent laughter almost choked him.

"You can quit us any time," growled Bull. "I'm gettin' sick of pamperin' you. Who th' hell wants to play cards any more?" he demanded, his arm sweeping the two hands into the discard. He shoved the spread-out pile toward Pecos.

"Put 'em away an' let's turn in. We've got to be ridin' before daylight, an' I'm tired, right now. There's plenty of hard work ahead of us if we get on like we should. Old Tight-Fist will be down on us with both feet, hollerin' why in hell ain't we got him his herd. Last word I got from him was that he wanted these cattle pronto. If we're in th' cattle business, an' want to get th' best prices we can, we got to listen to th' buyer. It ain't every place we can sell 'em. Tight-Fist is our best outlet, an' when he talks we want to be able to answer."

"Yeah," growled Larry, "an' when we deliver he wants to be able to pay, instead of holdin' us off like he did last year."

"He'll pay, all right, an' right up to date," said Bull, rising. "How old is that brush stuff?"

"Yearlin's," answered the brother of the Lazy S foreman. "We been cleanin' that thicket reg'lar, every year, an' th' only unbranded stuff in it is yearlin's."

"If I'd 'a' thought about that I wouldn't 'a' bothered with 'em till after th' drive," said Bull. "We can bring 'em in here any time, to let 'em grow up. Oh, well, there'll be some more trail stuff, I reckon."

"Yeah, forty head or more," replied Larry. "All in th' Lazy S brand. Speakin' of Tight-Fist, Bruce had a letter from him, an' th' old fool was gettin' all ribbed up. Said he hoped he didn't have to come down here, like he did once before, to get things movin'."

Bull growled something about the old fool being better off where he was, and began to undress, an example followed by the others.

"Last man puts out th' light," called Al Lennox, climbing into his bunk, and in a few moments silence reigned.

Back on the ledge Mesquite was already moving, and he was off of it before the conversation died. He did not go back up the cliff because he could not climb down it unseen in daylight, and shortly after daylight he intended to be at the hut. He was then going to make a journey while he had the time to make one, while the rustlers were busy with the new herd. He figured the distance and the time required, and he knew that he could get back again before any drive herd

was ready to leave the valley. So, instead of climbing up the bluff, he made his way cautiously along the foot of it, searching for a place in which to spend the night. He found it, back in a crevice, four hundred paces from the hut, and out of the field of the gang's activities. He now had another puzzle to solve: Tight-Fist, the man who bought the stolen cattle—what was his name and where did he live? If he knew those two things he would be saved a lot of time and trouble when it came time for him to follow that drive trail. After a few moments he put the matter out of his mind and soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER 14 - WHITTLING

Sounds of moving horses awakened Mesquite before daylight, and he left the crevice and moved cautiously toward the slope of the bench. Below him there was the creak of leather, voices, and a moving blur in the dark. A match flared, was cupped in a pair of hands and moved up to light a cigarette. The grotesque gargoyle of highlights and shadows revealed the face of Pecos Sam. In a few minutes the sounds ceased, except for an occasional voice, and then all was silent.

Working back to the base of the bluff, Mesquite went slowly along it, and soon came in sight of the cabin. Lamplight streamed from the end window and the cracks, and the smell of burning wood told the watcher that the new cook already had prepared a breakfast.

It was still dark, but dawn would break soon, and before then Mesquite would need to be in his chosen position. He went forward with deliberate caution, careful in placing each slow step; and by the time the first streamers of light silhouetted the eastern ridges, he had reached the rear wall of the hut and crouched low at its far corner, the corner nearest the corral. Here he waited in a sort of grim patience for the cue to action, not grudging the passing of time, for the passing of time meant that the riders were drawing farther out of gun sound.

Inside the building Charley Lennox went about clearing up after the meal he had cooked. He was still sullen from the unpleasant remarks of the night before, and from the silently contemptuous attitude of Bull before and during breakfast. His threat to quit the gang had been an idle one, although they did not know it. He believed himself to be safer in this valley than he would be elsewhere; and as long as he could determine and control his riding, he had little to fear from Haskins. But he was bitter against Tompkins, who already showed a growing disposition to send the fugitive about the country as freely as the others, who had nothing to fear.

The dishes washed, he let the fire go out to save wood, the gathering of which was more or less of a problem. He blew out the lamp as the interior of the hut

grayed in the morning light, and went outside, with his saddle and bridle, to drive his horse out on to the range and to get a fresh and well-fed one. Charley, these days, was very particular to have at hand the best-conditioned saddle animal he could obtain; there was no telling how much he might need such a horse at any moment.

The stirrup leathers dragged, and one of them got tangled with a spur and, swearing under his breath, he dropped the saddle and bent down to free himself; and as he slowly stood erect he froze in his tracks. He was looking squarely into the face of Mesquite, the stranger who had ridden on his way toward Texas. For a moment he was paralyzed by surprise and fear, and as his mind resumed its normal functions and shook off its momentary panic, Mesquite spoke.

"Take a chance, Charley; copper me," suggested the deputy, hopefully, both his hands hooked by their thumbs to the sagging belts, both his guns in their holsters. "You got an even break, yo're only a second fiddle, an' I ain't itchin' to be bothered with you. Let's see if you've got th' nerve to pull a gun in an even break, to save yore skinny neck from th' noose."

"What—what *you* doin' here?" mumbled Charley, still trying to understand the situation.

"I'm representin' John Haskins, an' I'll show you my badge, Charley," answered the deputy, slowly and invitingly raising both hands upward to the V of his vest. He turned back the edge of the cloth and let the slanting rays of the sun glint on the polished surface. He stood where he was for a moment, but Charley made no move.

"Mebby you can't read it from there," said the deputy, moving slowly forward, every inch of his advance an increased threat against the safety of the fugitive; every inch an added inducement for swift and desperate action.

"It says 'Deputy Sheriff,' Charley; but you can read it for yoreself."

Charley took a slow step backward with his left leg, and Mesquite was disappointed; and then he waited, more hopefully, for the right leg to go back and for Charley to go into action. The right slowly followed the left, but Charley's gun hand did not move.

"Then I reckon you better turn 'round, Charley," said Mesquite, in a voice of sugary sweetness, "an' hold out yore hands behind yore back. You'll be a lot safer, temporary, with steel around yore wrists." Then the sweetness died abruptly. "Damn yore yaller carcass! Ain't you got th' nerve to yank that gun an' make a try at savin' yore neck?" Frost crept into the cold eyes. "You reckon I want to lug you around an' lose a lot of time botherin' with you? You want to hang?"

"Gawd!" whispered the fugitive, licking his dry lips. He took another backward step, left leg moving; and when the right went back he broke and went to pieces.

"I knowed I couldn't get away with it," he quavered. "A feller thinks he can, but he knows different down in his heart. I— oh, well, what's th' use?" He slowly turned around, his arms reaching backward and his wrists stuck out behind his back. "Put 'em on," he sighed.

"Well, I'll be damned!" muttered Mesquite. "Yo're so yaller you'll stain th' rope." In great disgust he stepped forward, the handcuffs dangling from his fingers; and there were two sharp clicks, and Charley Lennox was facing the beginning of a long trail.

Mesquite yanked the gun from the captive's holster, pushed out the cartridges, and jammed it back again. Then he removed those in the belt loops, and searched his prisoner's pockets for more.

"All right, Charley; you stay here while I saddle up, an' if you want to run while my back's turned I'll promise you fifty yards start an' only one shot. If I miss, you can keep on goin'. That's a bargain."

He turned, picked up the riding gear and went to and into the corral; and when he led out the horse and saddled it Charley was where he had been left, an abject figure of misery and fear.

"All right, then; climb up there," ordered the deputy, and he had to assist the prisoner on to the horse. Mesquite swung up behind him and started for the trail; but, as he passed the corner of the house, he was struck by a thought, stopped the horse, and brusquely ordered Charley to dismount.

"Got a little job for you," he said, taking a key from his pocket.

He unlocked the right-hand cuff and pushed Charley into the house ahead of him.

"Where's a pencil?" he demanded, looking around.

"There was a stub lyin' on that shelf," mumbled Charley without interest.

"Well, if it ain't there, we can use a burned stick: ah, here it is. Now, then, you write on that table top a little message for yore friends. It goes like this: 'Dear Al. I'm quittin'. Good luck. C. L.' I reckon that'll be enough."

Mesquite gave him the pencil and stepped back.

"You see, I want to save their feelin's, 'specially Bully Tompkins'. I don't want Bull to do any worryin'. There'll be plenty of time later for that. Go ahead an' write, Charley."

Charley slowly obeyed, dropped the pencil, and faced about. Then he turned

around until his back was to his captor, and crossed his wrists. Mesquite grunted and snapped on the cuffs, and then ordered the captive to go outside and wait beside the horse.

The deputy examined the floor and the earth outside, saw that his prints were not plain enough to tell anything, helped Charley on the horse, swung up into the saddle, and soon rode along the trail to the east. When the right place offered, he left the trail and sent the horse up the steep incline where the bluff merged into the lower levels. When they drew near his camp he stopped, tied Charley's feet under the horse, and made the animal securely fast to a bush. Then he left him alone.

Charley was there when Mesquite returned on his own horse, and after a moment the deputy settled back into his saddle and led the way. When free of the brush he ordered Charley into the lead, to ride as he was directed.

Jim Conover rode up to the crest of the little rise, expecting at any moment to reach the place agreed upon. For the last two miles he had been expectant; but now he involuntarily drew rein and stared in frank disbelief.

The little hollow was tenanted, and Jim was a day early, having allowed himself that latitude in case he lost time in searching for the rendezvous; and he had ridden as straight as a hound heading for home. Mesquite Jenkins was leaning back comfortably and at ease against a saddle, a few feet from the dead ashes of a fire; but across the ashes, his handcuffed hands now in front of him and resting on his knees, another man likewise leaned against a saddle. Jim's professional instincts caused him to thrill with satisfaction.

"Charley Lennox, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed, and came down the rest of the slope like an arrow from a bow.

"Where'd you git him, Mesquite? How'd you find him?"

"Oh, I pried him out of a little valley. He was goin' to quit th' gang, anyhow, so I just helped him do it. How's Haskins?"

"Hangin' round Parsons' Saloon with th' rest of th' loafers," said Jim, his face still wreathed by a grin. "Say, this here shore is good news! Haskins will be plumb tickled. When do we start back?" he asked with unconcealed eagerness.

"We don't start back," answered Mesquite, smiling a little as his brother deputy's face fell. "We've got to talk somethin' over before we do any startin' anywhere. We can't afford to make any mistakes."

"Why? How's that? What mistakes?" demanded Jim, dismounting reluctantly. "We've got him, ain't we? Oh, shucks—I done forget that pack hoss. Oh, well, I'll go after it in a few minutes. What's th' matter? Why ain't we takin' him in?"

"You better go after that pack hoss before you unsaddle," said Mesquite. "I'll ride with you a piece, an' tell you a few things. You got another pair of cuffs on you?"

"Shore—you want 'em?"

"When I leave you will be time enough to take 'em," answered Mesquite, going to his horse. In a few moments he was in the saddle, waiting.

Jim had walked over to the prisoner, the cuffs dangling from a hand. He looked down, grinned, and then shook his head.

"It can't be done, Charley," he said. "You can't kill a man like that an' git off. It can't be done."

"Hell it can't!" snapped Charley. "There's plenty of 'em runnin' loose; an' I'd be runnin' loose, too, as far as Haskins an' you fellers are concerned. It took a fool stranger, with bull luck, to stumble onto me when he was lookin' for somethin' else. Don't try to crowd no fairy tales down my throat! I know better."

Jim leaned down, snapped one cuff around an ankle and the other to a wrist. He stood up again and grinned apologetically.

"Don't want you to get lost, Charley, in case we turn our backs," he explained.

"I was sorta hopin' he'd try it, Jim," said Mesquite's cold voice. "I've got a rule never to arrest th' same man twice for th' same crime. If Charley thinks he can get away, why, there's his saddle, an' there's his hoss, out there, picketed handy for him. He's welcome to try. Trials cost money an' make a lot of bother. Come on, Jim."

"That's four times you've tried to get me to make a break an' run for it," retorted Charley angrily. "Down by th' hut you tried it, an' twice on our way here. Now you've tried it ag'in. You reckon I'm fool enough to play target for you when I can't shoot back? Huh, you reckon that?"

"There!" exclaimed Mesquite, leaning eagerly forward in the saddle. "There, Charley! I knowed you had it in you. I'll give you a chance to shoot back, here an' now. Jim won't cut in if you win. What you say to that?"

"You go to hell!" snapped Charley. "You go on about yore business. I ain't no damn fool."

Jim grinned knowingly and went to his horse. The two deputies rode off to find the pack horse, and soon reached the top of the little rise. The prisoner eyed his horse, sighed, and leaned back resignedly to await the return of his captors.

On the crest of the ridge Mesquite stopped, his companion doing likewise. The little camp and the prisoner were in plain sight but out of earshot.

"You wanted to know why Charley couldn't be taken in an' jailed," said Mesquite. "He can be, if he don't talk to anybody except th' sheriff or some of th' deputies. If he can't be stopped from talkin' to any outsider, then he can't go to Desert Wells to shoot off his mouth until my job is finished."

"I don't know if we could do that or not," mused Jim. "I ain't a-tall shore." He eyed Mesquite speculatively and with deep curiosity. "What's th' reason?"

"He is one of a gang of rustlers that are workin' in th' basin," answered Mesquite. "They are gettin' ready for a big drive, an' if they make it, there ain't much hope for th' Lazy S. Charley made his threats about quittin' th' gang because of th' way he was bein' rode about killin' old Tobe. An' th' next mornin', after all th' others went back to th' basin for more cattle, he wrote a message on th' table an' made good his talk. I arrested him, made him write th' message, an' brought him out; but th' gang won't know that. They'll figger that he's just pulled stakes out of th' country. That's what I want 'em to believe. That's what they will believe, whether he's caught or not, if he doesn't get th' chance to shoot off his mouth an' tell th' truth to somebody that'll take it back to 'em. His capture can be explained right easy: you was just ridin' across th' country, cuttin' over from th' stage road, thirty, forty miles south. You ran across his trail, followed it on a chance, an' got him. That will be right understandable, an' about what could be expected. If he gets th' chance to talk, everythin' goes wrong. You savvy?"

"Yeah; I savvy," muttered Jim thoughtfully. "An' I figger he'll be a lot better off if he stays away from Desert Wells. But what will we do with him? We can't shoot him."

"No," growled Mesquite. "He won't make a break. I've offered him an even chance, three, four times, an' he wouldn't take it. It was worth th' risk an' gamble; but he's still on our hands. You've either got to stay right here in this camp with him until everythin's cleaned up, or take him to some town where it'll be safe to lock him up."

"Say," said Jim after a moment's thought, "how long can you stay here with him?"

"Not five minutes longer than I have to. I ought to be away from here right now. What's in yore mind?"

"Why, there's an old, deserted shack," said Jim, "built by one of th' first prospectors that ever came into th' country, standin' up in th' hills about a dozen miles south of th' stage road. He can be kept in there till hell freezes over, but I can't stay here with him an' get anybody to hold him in th' shack, an' I can't stay there with him an' be here waitin' for you. I don't want to leave him there while I

ride in for one of th' boys to watch him. I thought if you could stay here with him, I could dust for town, get Bill Tucker, an' straighten everythin' out. Bill could take him to th' shack, you could go where you please, an' I would be here in camp, waitin' for anythin' you want to spring."

Mesquite shook his head.

"Listen, Jim," he said thoughtfully. "We've got two pairs of cuffs between us. You've also got yore rope an' a picket line. Don't you figger that you can leave him in that shack alone long enough to get to town an' back? How long will that trip take you?"

Jim considered, scratching his head gently.

"I can save a little time by cuttin' straight across," he muttered. "Reckon I can make th' round trip in six hours or thereabouts."

"With two pairs of steel bracelets an' all that rope," said Mesquite, "I can fix him up so he can't get away in six days, let alone six hours. You can't untie steel, you can't fray, burn, or stretch it, Jim. With his hands behind his back, his ankles fastened together, an' both pairs tied in th' rope, an' th' rope ends tied to somethin' solid—what more do you want? Put him in th' middle of th' rope, so he can't get at either end, an' what chance has he got? An' even if he gets out of th' shack, he'll still be cuffed, hands an' feet, and he can't get far. That's th' thing to do."

"Yeah," replied Jim, grinning. "I'll get that pack hoss an' rustle right back."

They parted, Mesquite to return to the camp, and Jim to get the horse, which did not take long. A few minutes after the packs were transferred to Mesquite's horse, Jim helped the prisoner into the saddle, waved him to take the lead, and started for the old shack in the hills.

"I'll get back as soon as I can," he called over his shoulder.

"Right," replied Mesquite, wheeling, and loped along his back trail for the valley.

One job had been done, and done well; and the number of enemies had been reduced. There was now one less to fight, and the rest had no reason to wonder at the defection, for their companion's absence was understandable. Their leader, Mesquite believed, would be glad to get rid of the man who wanted especial favours and whose presence was more or less of a threat to the whole gang.

Mesquite chuckled and slapped the horse's shoulder.

"Go on, old feller; th' game is opened an' th' first trick is ours!"

CHAPTER 15 - RASCALS PLAN

Thanks to his arrangements with the sheriff to have the supplies sent on two days farther to save him time, and to the rustlers for clearing out so early in the morning and allowing Charley to be captured at daylight, Mesquite was back in his accustomed weed screen shortly after noon and looked down into a valley still deserted. It was not until just before nightfall that the gang put in an appearance, driving before it another but smaller herd of cattle. They left them where they had left the first herd, with a man to keep them from mixing with the other cattle, and came on to the hut. By the time they reached it, it was growing dusk, and as they realized that no smoke from the chimney meant no supper awaiting them, their conversation took on a different tone and emphasis, and they increased their pace.

Bully Tompkins beat his companions to the door by five lengths, leaped to the ground and dashed into the building, his voice roaring profane questions. There was no answer, but before the others could voice their inquiries, Bull shot out again, cursing in a streak. One glance at the corral told him a possible explanation, but while he was arguing it out with himself, Pecos had entered the hut in his old capacity of cook, lighted the lamp, and placed it on the table. As he took his hand from it he leaned forward curiously, spelled with moving lips, and went to the door.

"What you think, Bull?" he asked, but he gave the boss no time to answer. "Charley's pulled his stakes, an' left. He's quit us."

"Ain't I just been sayin' so?" demanded Bull, whirling about. "You deaf?"

"I ain't deaf, an' I heard you say so; but I just *read* it," replied Pecos. "He writ it on th' table, for Al. I told you that you'd ride him too much."

"Hell you did!" snapped Bull, his face growing red.

"Charley's gone for good?" asked his brother, his voice rising.

"For *good*!" snapped Bull truculently. "Damn good! He'll miss us a whole lot more than we'll miss him. As long as he hung around with us th' sheriff was due to drop in 'most any time. Now I don't care how good Haskins trails him. Th' gooder th' better. Open some cans, Pecos: we'll eat it cold to-night."

"Yo're shore right we'll eat it cold," replied Pecos, standing aside to let Al enter.

Al read the message three times and was silent. He wandered outside and back again, ill at ease, worrying about a brother who was not worth it. Then he went back to the table and read the message again. This time he seemed to believe it, and he walked slowly to a box and slumped down upon it, the picture of dejection.

Bully Tompkins watched him, and now sauntered over, drew another box up close, and sat down by the youth's side. He liked Al, for the young man had the qualities which his brother lacked.

"Worryin', Kid?" he asked.

"No-o—reckon not," answered Al, trying to smile. "I didn't think he'd do it. I thought he was just bluffin'. Still, I could see that he was right worried. Wonder where he went to? He shouldn't 'a' gone off alone, like that. He'll mebby be needin' help." He squeezed his upper lips nervously and shifted a little on the box. "He shouldn't 'a' gone off alone."

"Kid, th' farther he gits away from this part of th' country th' better he's off," said Bull kindly. "He ain't fool enough to strike in any direction except along our drive trail, an' that is th' one way that's safe." He slapped Al's knee. "Don't you worry, Kid; he's all right."

"I can't help it, Bull. He shouldn't 'a' gone off alone."

"Kid, we'll hate to lose you, but if it'll make you feel any better you can go after him," said Bull. "You can start th' first thing in th' mornin'. If you don't get track of him, come back ag'in."

"Yes; but if I do that, then you fellers are two men short instead of just one," muttered Al hesitatingly. "You won't have enough men left to make that drive, 'specially across that long, dry stretch. You'll need more than you've got."

"I can allus borrow a couple of men," said Bull heartily. "Go ahead, Kid, if you want to; but, Kid, if you do I think you'll be makin' a mistake." He started to rise, resting a hand on the youth's knee. "You just set right here an' kinda wrestle it out for yoreself."

"Them that eats, eats now," asserted Pecos, stepping back from the table to reach for a box. "Nobody'll burn themselves to-night." He glanced at the youth in the corner. "Come on, Al; there ain't nothin' like cold beans an' a full belly to stimulate thought. Get a can of them inside you an' you'll feel a lot better. Pass that bull butter an' them stale biscuits, Bull, before you set down. Larry'll be wonderin' what's keepin' us. Who's goin' to take over his job for th' first trick with th' herd?"

"Anybody that wants to," answered Bull. "We're a man short to-night; an' we'll mebby be another short to-morrow."

"All right, then; give it to Al," suggested Pecos. "Come on, Kid; eat an' get done. Larry'll be near starved."

"Why, let somebody else have th' first trick; I'd just as soon take th' mean one," replied Al, slowly approaching the table. "I might as well take two of 'em: Charley

was my brother, an' he'd have to ride his trick. I'd kinda like to square him that much, anyhow. Besides, I don't reckon I'll sleep much." As he seated himself his gaze sought the scrawled message, and rested on it.

Bull's arm swept some tins over the words in his clumsy effort to get an opened can to Al.

"Worryin' like that won't do neither you nor Charley any good, Kid," he said. "Eat up them beans."

Silence descended, broken only by the scrape of knives on tin, and in a few moments Al got up, wiped his lips on the back of a hand, and went to the door. The two men listened in silence and soon heard the horse pass the house and go down the slope of the bench. It was dark by this time, dark enough to hide objects at any distance, and dark enough to serve as a signal for Mesquite's descent down the wall of the bluff. Al had hardly disappeared before the deputy was working slowly and cautiously down the cliff, and it was not long before he was lying prone on the ledge behind the hut. He was very curious to learn the gang's reaction to Charley Lennox's desertion.

"Damn yaller coyote!" growled Bull under his breath. He cleared his throat and spoke louder. "Pecos, I hope somebody gits him cold, before th' Kid finds him, an' gets into trouble with him."

"Charley ain't got a chance, Bull," replied Pecos emphatically. "He ain't unless he keeps away from towns an' ranches, an' he didn't take no grub with him. I checked up on th' supplies, quick-like. When starvin' don't agree with him no more, then he'll have to ride in somewhere for grub; an' I'mbettin' that Haskins has got th' news spread for more'n two hundred miles, all around. You reckon he'll squeal on us if he's caught?"

Bull leaned forward, staring at his companion, veins standing out on his neck and forehead like angry serpents, his face a study in expression.

"Great — — —!" he ejaculated. "Shore as shootin' he will!" And then a quick look of relief came to his face. "No! No, he won't, neither! If he peaches on us, he peaches on his brother! You shore throwed a scare into me, Pecos!"

"That don't help us much, if Al's hell bent to find him," said Pecos, licking off one side of his knife. He turned the implement over, glanced at that side and calmly licked it, too. "If Al finds him, that ain't no good. How can we keep Al here, without makin' him suspicious?"

"Don't know," growled Bull. "Reckon we can find a way, somehow. Damn it! He didn't do us no good when he was with us; an' now that he's left us, we're worse off than ever. I got a notion to go after him myself! A damn good notion!" The

quality of his voice had changed at equal pace with the change of his expression, and it was as hard as his face.

Pecos ceased picking at the biscuit crumbs and looked up slowly, eyeing his companion speculatively, testing the tones of the voice as he now strove to read the expression on Bull's face.

"Uh-huh," he grunted; "but Larry would be better. Charley didn't have no grudge ag'in' Larry, an' th' youngster can get right up clost to him. He'd shoot you on sight, from ambush, like he did old Tobe. An', besides, Bull, you ain't itchin' for to collect notches on yore gun handles. Larry is."

"You reckon Larry would do it?" asked Bull, his eyes beginning to gleam with cunning. He was trying to read his companion's thoughts without flatly revealing his own. He was trying to be dead certain that the hints in Pecos's words, broad as they were, had identically the same meaning as those in his own. The last few words set him right, and his face brightened.

"Reckon that all depends on how we go about it," replied Pecos thoughtfully. "Charley mustn't be captured."

"Which means that if we can't hold Al back, then we got to get Larry off ahead of him, with a good start; an' to do that, Larry's got to leave to-night. He can foller th' drive trail well enough, an' wait till mornin' to look for tracks. Charley shore took that way out—there ain't no other way that's safe an' has water.

"Damn that yaller coyote!" swore Bull in a sudden gust of rage. "What about our round-up, our drive? We can't let both of them fellers go off ridin' to hell—an'-gone with all this work on our hands. To hell with Charley! Let him peach. Give us an even break, an' in a week we'll be on our way with th' herd; in two, we'll be sittin' home, ready to make a liar out of him."

"We will if Al stays here," said Pecos. "If Al don't, then Larry has got to find Charley, an' find him first. We can get help to take their places with th' work, an' th' work has got to go on, an' go fast. Ain't no use gettin' on th' prod an' losin' yore head."

"If you know so much, Pecos," retorted Bull with heavy sarcasm, "suppose you keep Al here."

"All right," placidly replied Pecos. "You send Larry after Charley, an' I'll keep Al out of it."

"Wonder why Charley didn't take any grub with him?" mused Bull, changing the subject. "He couldn't 'a' figgered on goin' very far."

"Charley ain't been himself since he killed old Tobe," responded Pecos. "He's nervous, scared, flighty. Chances are he got panicky an' pulled out before he

settled down ag'in. Couple of times I had th' idear that Charley was goin' loco; an' I ain't shore, right now, that I was wrong. A thing like that hits different fellers in different ways." He picked up a tin, gleaned its three remaining beans, and threw it into a corner. "Charley's lost his nerve."

Bull nodded, remembering how he had ridden the man, being quick to sense the subtle change. Prior to Tobe's death, Bull would have thought twice before attempting to use spurs on the elder Lennox.

"Well," he said, leaning back at ease against the wall, "Larry'll be ridin' in soon. My job begins then; yourn, when Al comes in."

Mesquite cautiously shifted weight to ease aching muscles, but remained where he was. The ledge was proving to be invaluable to his purposes, and he was getting a knowledge of these men only second in value to the knowledge of their plans. Except for Al Lennox they all merited whatever fate overtook them, and had he felt any sympathy for them whatever, it now would have died. His thinking was interrupted by the sounds of a horse nearing the bench, and it was not long before the horseman reached the corral.

When Larry entered the hut he went straight to the table.

"Al told me it was cold beans to-night," he said, reaching down for an opened can as he seated himself. "I'm hungry enough to eat anythin'. So Charley sloped, huh?"

"Yes," growled Bull, shifting uneasily. "He did. You got any idear what that means to th' rest of us?" he asked ominously.

"Not as much as it would if he'd allus done his fair share of th' work," growled Larry. "I know how he felt about doin' much ridin', but it riled me, just th' same." He filled his mouth and chewed hastily.

"Charley's due to get caught," said Bull, toying with a knife. "He didn't take a mouthful of grub with him, an' he'll have to ride in somewhere to get some. That means he'll be caught, for Haskins shore has warned th' whole country to be on th' lookout for him. That's th' way them sheriffs work. An', besides, Charley's lost his nerve."

"All right," grunted Larry as the last bean went down. He scooped up another knifeful. "Al don't know whether to go after him or not."

"Somebody's *got* to go after him," said Bull, for the first time looking Larry in the face. "Somebody's got to go after him, an' they got to *get* him. They got to get him cold. Al's got to stay here."

"Aw, hell, let Charley go. We're better off without him," replied Larry, again filling his mouth. He chewed hastily, gulped the mouthful, and reached for more.

"I didn't know what minute Haskins would get on Charley's trail. If he did get on it, an' followed it, it would bring him to us. Let Charley go. Let him go to hell, if he wants. He's no good."

"Yeah, he's no good alive," said Bull. "If he gets caught he'll peach on us, shore as shootin'. Charley's lost his nerve, an' we rode him a lot."

"You rode him a lot, you mean," retorted Larry, and then the full import of the other's words became clear to him. He held the knife between table and mouth, and looked intently at Bull. His gaze shifted to Pecos and found the same disturbing expression. He lowered the knife and rested it on the can. "Do you reckon he would?" he asked after a moment.

"Well, what do *you* think?" countered Bull.

"Well, I don't know; but I got a right good idear where he went," replied Larry. "We both worked on th' same range, an' he was plumb stuck on it, an' he had some good friends there. I wish I was shore!"

"You wouldn't have to do no wishin' if you was as shore as I am," said Pecos, for the first time taking part in the conversation. It might have been this fact that gave the words so much weight with the younger man.

"You mean that, Pecos?" demanded Larry tensely, leaning forward on the table. "You mean that?"

"I shore don't mean nothin' else. I can feel th' rope around my neck, right now," growled Pecos, arising and fussing with the table. He threw the soiled knives into a dish pan, and then walked out of the hut, Larry turning his head to look after him.

"First time I ever saw Pecos nervous like that," he observed, facing around again. "Looks like he's kinda scared, Bull."

"He don't scare easy," replied Bull; "but he's shore scared now. Said he had a mind to clear out while he could." He frowned suddenly and smashed his fist down on the table, the cans jumping under the impact. "It's just our luck! Here we got th' slickest game in th' country, everythin' goin' fine, all of us makin' more money than we ever thought we could, an' that damn yaller coyote headin' straight for jail, an' sendin' us to th' same place! By Gawd, if I knowed where he could be found, I'd put a stop to it! He's goin' to die, anyhow, an' he oughta die before he gits a chance to talk."

"All right, Bull; I'll tell you where he is an' how to get there," said Larry uneasily. Bull laughed scornfully, almost insultingly.

"Huh! Fine chance *I'd* have, gettin' clos to him! He hates me like pizen. Somebody's got to go who won't get potted from ambush; somebody he likes an'

won't suspect. Somebody who knows th' fellers he knows, th' places he used to hang out in. Tell you what: if Charley's mouth ain't stopped, I'm pullin' stakes out of this country right sudden. If you boys got any sense you'll be right on my heels—you boys an' th' other crowd, too. Everythin' will go to hell, an' we all can work for forty dollars a month th' rest of our lives, when we ain't dodgin' sheriffs."

"Th' other crowd, too," muttered Larry, scowling. "That's right: if we have to get out, they are in th' same fix. You know, Bull, I reckon I've been workin' too hard. I oughta lay off five, six days, even if it does make us short handed an' hold up th' drive."

"You have been kinda peaked," said Bull, hiding his satisfaction. "I reckon you can go if you want to. Don't see no reason why not. When was you figgerin' on startin'?"

"After breakfast."

"Feelin' as porely as you do," said Bull significantly, "*I'd* ride in th' cool of th' night, out of th' sun, if I aimed to foller our drive trail."

"I aim to foller it more'n halfway to th' end," said Larry, picking up the knife again. "I won't have to look for tracks till day breaks; an' they ain't very important, anyhow." He chewed energetically. "I figger he turned off at th' second crick. That's where I would 'a' turned off if I was headin' for where he's goin'."

Bull nodded and reached for tobacco sack and papers.

"You oughta get away before Al comes back," he said. "That'll end that part of th' argument, an' give us a better chance to keep Al here. When is he ridin' in from th' herd? When are we supposed to relieve him?"

"In time for breakfast. He said he'd ride both tricks. He wanted time to think, an' he said he couldn't sleep, anyhow."

"Five o'clock," muttered Bull. "That gives you till three. Two hours oughta be enough. Th' main thing is to get away an' out of his sight. You better turn in now an' get some sleep." He arose and strode to the door, looking out. "Hey, Pecos!" he called.

"What you want?" asked a voice from the bottom of the slope.

"Come up an' turn in, so you won't wake us all up. Larry wants to get some sleep before he starts. He's got a lot of ridin' ahead of him."

"All right," replied Pecos. "I can do with a little sleep myself."

On the ledge behind the hut Mesquite did not wait until silence would add sharpness to the hearing of the inmates, but took advantage of the talk and the bedtime preparations to steal away. He gained the foot of the difficult trail up the face of the cliff, and climbed slowly, testing each hand hold before depending

upon it. After what seemed to be a long time he reached the top, crawled over the rim, and went to his camp.

It was too early to go about carrying out the plan he had in mind, and he was afraid to turn in and go to sleep lest he should not awaken in time. He dared not light a fire, because there was danger that its reflected glow could be seen from the middle of the valley, where Al Lennox rode herd.

He sat down with his back against the saddle to pass the time until the moment should come for him to leave, but after half an hour or so he gave up the task and yielded to his first impulse.

It did not take him long to find the horse and to saddle it, and he was soon riding eastward down the rolling, broken slope paralleling the valley below, letting the horse go at its own pace and in its own way. Long before daylight he was ten miles along the drive trail, where he felt that the sound of a Colt could carry no warning to the men at the far western end of the valley. Coming to a thicket at a sharp turn in the trail, he left the road, staked his horse in a draw far enough away for no whinnying to betray him, and returned to ensconce himself in the cover, with the trail not a dozen feet from him.

Here Mesquite waited, in patience and in optimism, for the coming of Larry Rankin, the make-believe bridegroom-to-be. Larry's bachelorhood was as yet unthreatened: it had served as a good excuse for the range gossips in justification for him leaving a good job under his brother and to throw in with an outfit whose herd was negligible. That same Larry whose obsession was the addition of notches to the handle of his gun, and who even now was riding to commit a cold murder, to kill a man who regarded him as a friend.

"Th' whittlin' is good, so far," thought Mesquite grimly. "Now that I got some place to take 'em an' leave 'em, I don't care how easy they put up their hands; but if Larry makes a play I'll see it through just as cheerful."

CHAPTER 16 - THE END OF A TRAIL

Back in the hut daylight found a fire burning and breakfast about ready. Larry had left two hours before, to make the valley safe for thievery, and Al Lennox would be waiting for his relief. Bull and Pecos moved about impatiently, and at last sat down to the table.

Bull ate hurriedly, anxious to let Al ride in, and he glanced covertly at his companion, who was to convince Al that his place was here in the valley instead of on the trail. Pecos chewed placidly, although noisily, and reached again for the coffee pot.

"Want another cup?" he asked, lifting the pot.

Bull pushed his empty cup toward the pot with one hand without checking the activities of the other.

"You want me to tell him anythin', to kinda smooth things for you?" asked Bull between mouthfuls.

"It might look better if you said somethin'," replied Pecos, concentrating. "You'd natchully exchange words as you passed each other; but you'll act a mite anxious about gittin' on to th' herd. You tell him that I got news for him, an' a lot more time to tell it in than you have. That'll leave me free to grab holt of any break that comes my way, an' I won't have to worry about what you said to him. Expectin' somethin', he won't be so surprised by what I tell him."

"Well," said Bull, hurriedly arising. "*I* done *my* job with Larry."

"An' I'll do mine with Al," replied the cook. "Wonder if any more hard luck is fixin' to drop onto us? Seems like we've had our share."

"Damn' if I know," growled Bull, picking up his saddle and going through the door, "an' damn' if I care a whole lot," came floating back as he turned the corner.

Al could see him ride down the bench, and every rod of his progress, and met him a quarter of a mile from the herd, which was grazing peacefully and in contentment.

"Hungry?" asked Bull, smiling his best smile.

"An' sleepy, an' tired, an' damn' disgusted," replied Al, slowing.

A cow wandered from the herd and started down the valley, and under his breath Bull blessed it.

"There goes that damn one-eye," he growled, pressing his knees against his mount. "Hey, Al! Pecos has got some news for you. He'll have more time to tell it than I have. Blast that one-eye!" and he dashed forward.

"About Charley?" shouted Al, drawing rein and turning in his saddle.

"Yeah, about Charley!" came the shouted reply, and Al turned and raced for the hut.

Pecos was washing dishes and whistling cheerfully while he washed, a combination rare to him. He usually swore when on that job. He looked up and out at the sounds of the nearing horse, and saw Al leap from the saddle and step through the door. Pecos stopped whistling and smiled understandingly. He was very cheerful, as cheerful as the bearer of good news should be.

"Well, Kid," he said in a voice strongly suggesting congratulation, "you won't have to go buck-jumpin' all over th' damn country a-lookin' for yore brother. I

reckon he'll be back here in five, six days—back where he belongs, where his friends can kinda keep an eye on him. What you think about that?"

"Why, you ain't heard from him?" incredulously asked Al.

"Nope, we ain't," said Pecos, hanging up what he called a dish towel and drying his hands on his trousers. "But we're aimin' to. Larry said he knowed right where Charley was headin' for, because Charley had said things to him th' last few days that gave him a good lead. Larry's gone after him, to bring him back."

"What business has Larry got to cut into it?" demanded Al.

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Pecos, staring at the youth. "Why," he explained suavely, "he knowed where he could find him without ridin' to hell-an'-gone. He was so shore of it that we told him to get an early start, find Charley, an' get back with him pronto. We don't want to hold up th' work no longer than we has to, an' Charley shouldn't lose his share of th' earnin's." He looked closely at Al and shook his head gently in mild disappointment. "We never figgered you wouldn't like it, Kid. We shore reckoned we was doin' you a favour, an' we come near keepin' quiet about it, an' makin' it a surprise to you. Shucks!"

"Oh, I suppose I am a damn fool," muttered Al, moving restlessly. He looked at his companion searchingly. "You reckon Charley's been kinda slippin', Pecos—kinda slippin' in his mind?"

Pecos threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Seems to me you been doin' all th' slippin' for th' Lennox fambly, Kid," he chuckled, "worryin' like you have been over somethin' that there wasn't nothin' to worry about. Charley's just as solid in his mind as any one of us; an' now that I've made Bull promise to quit ridin' him, everythin' will go on as sweet as 'lasses."

He waved at the table with one hand and slapped the youth on the back with the other.

"Set down an' eat yore breakfast, Kid, before it gits colder. In three, four days, say half a dozen at th' most, we'll all be together ag'in, cuttin' out as fine a bunch of cattle as ever faced a drive trail. Th' luck's breakin' our way at last."

The youth smiled tentatively, and his eyes softened a little. He was looking his companion squarely in the face, and after an instant's scrutiny, nodded and moved to the table.

"I allus felt that you was th' one man in this crowd that was my friend, Pecos," he said. "An' Larry was allus right friendly with Charley. Mebby I was foolish, feelin' that I oughta go off an' ride herd on Charley."

"Well, you was, in a way," replied Pecos, reaching for the coffee pot, "an' then, ag'in, in a way you wasn't. So far as common sense was concerned, you shore

was; but bein' his brother, you wasn't. It sorta looked like a yearlin' goin' off to advise an' perfect an old range bull. Here, hold up yore cup."

"Then you don't reckon Charley was actin' a little strange?"

"Oh, now I understand why you felt you oughta find him," said Pecos. "Shucks! He ain't no more strange in his head than I am; no more than I was goin' to act if Bull kept on ridin' him," asserted Pecos, his expression becoming stern. "I told Bull so, too; an' Bull, he's seen th' light. Charley won't have no more troubles, Kid, in a few days."

Al laughed softly with relief as he reached for the bacon.

"We oughta make a big clean up, this time, Pecos," he said, glad to be able once more to think of cattle and profits.

"Th' biggest we ever made, Kid," said Pecos, walking over to his saddle. "An' don't you forget that we collect for that last herd, too: three hundred head, at about twenty-five dollars each. Old Tight-Fist couldn't pay for 'em then. But now they've been sent up th' trail an' delivered, an' he's made his four dollars a head. He'll have th' money, an' he'll pay for this herd on delivery or he won't get 'em. Think of what Charley would 'a missed."

"That'll be a lot of money," mused Al, his smile now genuine. With all that money he and Charley could slip away, perhaps south of the border, and have more than a chance.

"It's more than any of us ever saw at one time, I reckon," chuckled Pecos. "You turn in, now, an' get some sleep. We can't do much till th' others get here, anyhow; an' we ain't goin' to do their work for 'em. I'm goin' out to talk with Bull an' give you a chance to sleep."

"Sleep?" inquired Al, his voice sliding up the scale. "I never felt so fresh in all my life! You wait a shake, an' I'll be with you."

"Come if you want to," replied Pecos easily; "but if you ain't sleepy now, you will be on herd to-night. Better crawl into yore bunk an' get some rest. We don't want a sleepy man on trick with th' herd."

"Reckon yo're right, Pecos," said Al, smiling and turning toward his bunk. "Seems to me I oughta be able to go to sleep like a kid; anyhow, I'll try."

"That's th' idear," replied Pecos, grinning. He stepped through the door to saddle up and carry the good news to Bull, grinning as he thought of his words to Al: Charley would have no more troubles in a few days.

Half a score of miles beyond the eastern end of the valley, which meant more than a score of miles from the hut, Larry Rankin smiled at the graying sky and at last could see the fresh prints of a shod horse which had passed along the trail

less than twenty-four hours before. As yet the light was not strong enough to reveal any particular characteristics of the prints, nothing beyond general shape and size; and had the details been plainly apparent they would have meant nothing to Larry for the reason that he did not know what horse Charley Lennox had chosen for his flight. When the light grew stronger he would take the time to examine them and memorize them, so as to be able to follow them wherever they led. That would be enough for him, and now he pushed on at a better gait, anxious to overtake the fugitive and get the work done and over with. If he was at all bothered by the task he had set for himself, it did not show outwardly.

Behind a thicket at a sharp turn of the trail Mesquite Jenkins kept his calm and patient watch. Daylight cleared up certain visual mysteries of the poorer light of dawn, and very quickly extended his range of vision to the far horizon. Again he was warned by a cloud of dust, far down on the drive trail; and he slipped from his cover and hastened back to his horse. In a few moments he was in the saddle and riding back toward the trail, and he reached it at a point a little to the north of the thicket, where the trail turned and went around a thrust-up mass of clay and rock. Here he drew rein and stopped, patient as an Indian, cold as frost, and as alert as a startled antelope. His hand went up and toyed with the nickel-plated badge on the inner edge of his vest, and he smiled coldly as he unpinned it and fastened it on the outside, in as prominent a place as he could find. His status would be revealed at the first quick, unbelieving glance.

Larry pushed on at a steady gait, his impatience making him a little careless about saving his horse for what might prove to be a long, stern chase. He followed the winding trail up the gentle incline at a lope, glancing occasionally down at the horseshoe prints so plainly cut. Something about them suddenly took his attention, a close attention, and he slowed to a walk in order better to examine them. Somehow they looked to be too freshly made to have an age of twenty-four hours. A harder stretch of trail baffled him, and he pushed on to find a softer place. Ahead of him loomed up a wind-carved hummock, its near face almost perpendicular. He knew it well, and he knew that a short distance beyond it was a soft stretch of ground. Here he would dismount and study the tracks closely. A spur rolled along the flank of his horse, and it shot forward toward the hummock, now less than two score paces away. He was leaning forward in the saddle, peering over the right shoulder of his mount at the faint tracks, when he sensed a movement and raised his eyes. His involuntary reaction to what he saw made him jerk back on the reins and rowel the horse. The animal arose on its hind legs, turned in the air and came down bucking, at right angles to the trail. Larry's right hand and arm were in plain sight, holding the reins, but now his left hand streaked

to the leather to release the right. What he was looking at was that erstwhile bunkhouse mate, with a glittering deputy sheriff's badge flaunting itself on the dusty vest.

Mesquite rode deliberately forward, the reins lying loose on his horse's neck, both of his hands resting on his hips, the guns but an inch or two below them.

"I want you, Larry," he said unemotionally, "in th' name of th' law."

"Hell you do!" snapped Larry, his eyes glinting. "What for?"

"Rustlin'."

"Huh!" snapped Larry ominously. "That so? Well, wantin' an' gittin' are two different things. I'll give you one chance: git outa my way," he ordered, without in the least intending to let the problem be so easily solved. This new deputy must know considerable about the gang to want one of its members for cattle stealing. The deputy was dangerous, alive; therefore, he had to be killed. "Lift yore hands up, an' lemme pass!"

"If any hands go up they'll be yore own," countered Mesquite. "I ain't waitin' much longer, neither. Stick 'em up!"

Larry's horse had quieted, and now, for the first time, he could count on a steadier saddle, a more certain shot. He had hardly dared to hope that the new deputy would fail to take advantage of the prancing, bucking horse to get the drop on him; but to his surprise and great satisfaction the deputy had made that mistake, and saved Larry the necessity of shooting under a disadvantage.

"Up with 'em!" snapped the deputy, his patience at an end, and eager to force the issue, one way or the other.

Larry's left hand dropped the reins and went upward, but the right streaked down as he threw himself sidewise in the saddle. His gun muzzle had cleared the top of the holster when Mesquite moved and fired, and the spasmodic contraction of the rustler's gun hand fired the weapon before it fell to the ground.

Larry arose in the stirrups on rigid legs, both hands grabbing the pommel and holding tightly; and then he relaxed, his knees buckled, his hands loosened and slipped, and he toppled sidewise from the saddle, one foot slipping through the stirrup as he fell, and locked itself there. The horse leaped forward, dragging the rustler along the ground; but Mesquite's rope settled over its head, his own horse squatted and set itself, and Larry's mount went up on its hind legs and fell over backward. Before it could rise again, Mesquite sat on its head, working with the stirrup. Larry did not move, and he never would again.

The horse quieted, Mesquite threw the burden across the saddle, lashed it there with a few turns of rope, mounted his own horse, and led the way from the

trail, to return to the rendezvous with added responsibilities for Jim Conover.

"Three left," muttered the deputy. "An' one of 'em is a right decent kid; too decent to hang out with that crowd." After a moment's thought he glanced behind at the led horse, looked around the horizon, and then straight ahead. "Too decent: we'll see what we see."

Jim Conover, again in camp, was very much surprised when Mesquite rode into sight; and Jim got up hastily and ran to meet him, and to learn about the second horse and the identity of what it carried.

"Larry Rankin!" he exclaimed, his mouth remaining open. With an effort he got it to working again. "Great land of freedom! Dead?"

Mesquite nodded and dismounted.

"He made a play. I told him he was under arrest an' to throw up his hands. Th' left went up, but th' right went down. I kept my hands away from my guns till then, to give him his chance. He was a mite too slow. What are you goin' to do with him?"

"What can we do with him, except dig a hole?" asked Jim with some asperity.

"I'll help you," said Mesquite quietly, remembering Jim's "we." "When things settle down, he can be found by anybody that wants to get him. He was on th' trail of Charley Lennox. They figgered that Charley had sloped, would get caught, an' would tell all he knew. Larry went after him to find him an' close his mouth—forever. That was why I gave him a chance to go for his gun."

"But what did you have ag'in' him, in th' first place?" demanded Jim, somewhat addled by the events.

"Cattle stealin'," answered Mesquite. "There's three more in that gang, an' there's another gang. They work together. This country's goin' to be right surprised, Jim; but it ain't to be surprised even a mite until th' last man is either caught or killed."

"Two gangs," muttered Jim, his face a study. "Two gangs, cattle stealin'! Nobody reckoned there was any rustlin' goin' on down in this country."

"It's been goin' on for at least four years," said Mesquite, looking his companion in the eyes. "Steady an' systematic; smooth as oil. What did you think made th' Lazy S slip from a first-class ranch, to a measly joke? Why do you reckon old Tobe was killed?" He laughed grimly. "I've got th' motive for th' sheriff."

"Well, I'm damned!" exclaimed Jim, staring at the new deputy. "How come you tumbled onto it, bein' a stranger?"

"Because I was a stranger; because my eyes were new to th' scene, an' because I can read tracks like you can read print," answered Mesquite. "There were too

many strange things. One or two, a feller don't pay much attention to; but when they start to count up, an' to line up, they make a feller start thinkin'." He paused and turned to face the led horse and its burden. "Is Charley all right?"

"Shore; Bill Tucker's with him, actin' even dumber than usual. I reckon mebby Bill will learn a lot of things before he's through with that shack an' Charley."

Mesquite nodded, and then remembered something.

"You got my cuffs with you?"

"Yes, an' my own, too. Bill's usin' his own on Charley. Here, take 'em."

Mesquite pocketed the steel bracelets, jingling the chains a little.

"They shore beat rope all hollow," he said, smiling.

"Yes, they do," answered Jim, his thoughts elsewhere. "So Larry was on th' rustle! Live an' learn—live an' learn!"

"Yeah, live an' learn," said Mesquite. He looked closely at the other. "I'm livin', an' I want to learn somethin'. You must know a lot of folks around this country, Jim. You ever hear of anybody that's called Tight-Fist?"

Jim looked up, his brow puckered by deep thought, and he shook his head.

"No, I never heard of anybody that was called that. Why?"

"Just curious, that's all," said Mesquite. "I figger on meetin' him some day."

CHAPTER 17 - NUMBER THREE

Mesquite had but little to do the next few days, for the gang, or what was left of it, marked time and waited for Larry to return and do his part of the range work. During daylight the deputy spent his time on the top of the cliff, behind his fringe of vegetation; after dark he lay on the ledge behind the hut, picking up additional crumbs of information.

From his listening post he learned that Al was steadily getting more restless as the time passed without news of Charley or Larry. Pecos and Bull talked with a placid satisfaction which Al at first took to mean that they believed that Larry would find the deserter and bring him back; but as time passed without word from either of the absentees, the two older men began to grow a little irritable. It might be that Larry had got the worst of it, or had taken advantage of the situation to steal a holiday and to enjoy the transient pleasures of some hospitable saloon.

They rode herd on the last collection of cattle as a matter of routine and finally began to talk of getting help and going ahead with the work. It was on the fourth night that this idea left the realm of the possible and joined the ranks of the

definitely decided.

It was Al's turn to have the first night trick with the cattle, and after he had left the hut Bull had wolfed his supper, Pecos waiting to clear away the table and wash the dishes.

Bull had ridden in late, and he was hungry, and he ate in silence, a silence that was thoughtful and that gave promise of a coming truculence. Pecos sat idly on a box, smoking a cigarette, and was also silent and contemplative. When the meal was over Bull arose and strode through the door without a word, and paced to and fro before the house. Pecos, glancing knowingly after him, lazily arose and began his endless task. When he had cleaned the last tin and hung up the towel, he went to the door and looked out into the growing dusk.

Bull was still pacing restlessly, his expression a scowl. Pecos watched him in silence for a few moments, and then turned and lighted the lamp. He picked up a piece of month-old newspaper and spread it out on the table, his eyes passing over thrice-read paragraphs which his mind refused to translate into thought. It was dark when his companion reentered the hut.

"Huh!" growled Bull, eyeing the reader with frank disapproval. "That all you got on yore mind? That all you got to do?"

Pecos looked up blandly.

"Well, it shore saves a lot of boot leather," he retorted pointedly.

"Yeah," growled Bull, throwing himself down upon a box. "It does; an' it saves thinkin', too. What th' hell do you reckon has happened to Larry?"

"Comin' right down to cases," responded Pecos, "he figgered it would take him five, six days. Just because we got th' itch to get on with th' work ain't no reason for us to get all prodded up about Larry."

"Huh!" sneered Bull. "You been actin' like you was gettin' some prodded yoreself."

Pecos nodded.

"Yes, sometimes; but it's from settin' round doin' nothin' when I know we ought to be workin' them cattle."

"Well, we shore oughta be, hadn't we?" growled Bull irritably.

"Yes, we oughta; but if we do, then we've got to have help."

"We can get that," replied Bull. "Rankin will let us have a couple of his men."

Mesquite smiled in the dark. He knew, in his own mind, that the outfit of the Lazy S was mixed up in the cattle stealing; but here was a direct connection, and one which now promised to be proved by sight as well as hearing. This was

another necessary fact to be established, one on which he could justify swift, relentless action. He shifted slightly and then lay quiet. He was interested in learning who would carry the call for assistance, and he hoped it would be Bull.

"Well, it's one thing or th' other—do we, or don't we?" asked Pecos, rolling another cigarette.

"I vote that we do, first thing in th' mornin'," said Bull. "We can round up, cut out, make up th' herd, an' get all ready to start it on th' trail. If them Lazy S fellers don't want to go with it, then we can push it a day's drive on th' way an' hold it outside th' valley to keep it away from th' rest of th' cattle."

"Yes; there's water an' grass enough out there on Medicine Flat to take care of a herd of that size for a week or more," acquiesced Pecos. "All right, then: we do. Who'll take back th' word to Rankin?"

"Al!" snapped Bull. "He's ready to jump 'most any way, an' I'd rather have him jump west than east. If we don't get him right busy an' watch ourselves, he'll be follerin' th' other two."

Pecos nodded again.

"I've been expectin' to see him start," he admitted, "an' I didn't know how to stop him."

"I'll stop him, damn quick!" snapped Bull, his eyes blazing.

"You will, after you stop me first," replied Pecos quietly.

"What you mean?" growled Bull, turning like a flash.

"I ain't no Charley, an' you know what I mean. Don't you touch walnut ag'in' Al."

Bull sneered, and laughed ironically.

"Hell! I wasn't figgerin' on gun play!"

"Then it's all right with me. That's settled. You goin' to send him in th' mornin'?"

"Right after we eat. That'll make him so busy, that an' th' work with th' cattle, that he won't have much time to think about his own troubles. I'm tired an' goin' to turn in. You reckon you can read that paper without readin' it out loud like you usually do?"

"I've already read it two, three times. Reckon I can pass th' time until I relieve Al," replied Pecos. "You climb in yore bunk any time you want."

Mesquite crawled from the ledge's rim and toward the trail up the cliff. He made the climb in a silence that would have done credit to a Pawnee horse thief, and he was soon back in his camp. Again he leaned back against his saddle, smoking thoughtfully; and slowly the answers to his questions came to him. He

remembered the place where he could get down into the cañon; and, that cleared up, he unrolled his blanket with a dexterous flip and was soon in it and asleep. The first streak of dawn awakened him, a hurried breakfast came from the cans, and shortly thereafter he was riding westward, heading for the feeder cañon which had baffled him on his first visit and forced him to go miles out of his way to get around it.

At midnight Pecos had relieved the youth at the herd, told him the change in plan, and instructed him to look forward to a ride into the basin, to the east line of the Lazy S, and right after breakfast. Al nodded and rode in to the hut, where he lost no time in turning in. At four o'clock Bull crawled out of his bunk, drew on his boots, grabbed his hat, coat, and riding gear, and was soon on his way to relieve Pecos, who left the herd to meet him.

"I told him, last night," said Pecos, "to see how he'd take it."

"Yeah?" inquired Bull with sudden and belligerent interest. "An' how did he take it?"

"Right cheerful. Acted like he'd be glad to have somethin' to do to keep him busy an' from thinkin' too much. Beats hell how anybody would do any worryin' about a skunk like Charley."

"Yeah. Well, you send him to Rankin as soon as he gets through eatin'. We'll try to make up some lost time before Tight- Fist starts yowlin'."

Pecos nodded and rode on to the hut, where he found Al starting the fire. It was not long before the two had eaten, and Al picked up his saddle to go out.

"Had I better tend herd while Bull rides in an' eats his breakfast?"

"No, Al; you head right for that Lazy S crowd," answered Pecos. "There's Bull's breakfast, an' I'll relieve him till he gets outside of it. Get a-goin', Kid: things have got to get movin' around this place, right pronto. We've lost a hell of a lot of time."

"Yes, I know," answered Al, pausing in the door. "Who all do you want of that gang?"

"All they can send; they can all come if they want to—they only make a bluff at ridin' line, anyhow, an' they might as well be out here, doing somethin' worth while."

"Wonder how Larry's makin' out?"

"I got a feelin' he'll be back here with yore brother by to-morrow or th' next day," answered Pecos, picking up his own saddle. "It'll mebby take him longer than he figgered, though; but he'll be here some day, all right, an' Charley will be with him. Git a-goin', Kid; git a-goin'."

"All right; but if Charley ain't back to-morrow, or th' next day at th' latest, then

I'm goin' after him."

"Kid, if I didn't have an extry strong constitution, you'd shore make me sick. You reckon Charley's a damn infant?"

"I reckon he's my brother!" snapped Al, and he strode toward the corral.

Pecos dropped his saddle and waited, swearing steadily, until the youth had saddled up and ridden off, and without a backward glance. Pecos did not care to go out to the corral with him and help to continue any arguments, for he was fast losing his temper. When he did leave the hut he looked after the departing rider, a sneer on his face.

"You'll have a hell of a long ways to go, Kid, to find that worthless brother of yourn; you'll have to go plumb into hell. I figger that's about where he is right now, if Larry's got good sense. That's one coyote that won't tell all he knows, an' it's one full share to split up between th' rest of us. An' Larry is due to do anythin' we tell him to: any damn thing a'tall. Larry is right where we want him, an' so is th' swelled-up foreman of th' Lazy S!"

He was in rare good humour when he relieved Bull, and the latter noticed it and inquiringly raised his eyebrows.

"What's so funny now?"

Pecos chuckled.

"If Larry found Charley an' done a good job, then Charley is out of th' way, an' th' sheriff, too," explained the cheerful cook. "An' Larry will take orders from us, an' so will his brother. You savvy that? An' so will his brother! We hold a noose to go round Larry's neck!"

"Yeah?" inquired Bull in a rising voice. "Then you want to hold it gently, an' not try to use it. There's Larry an' Bruce; there's th' rest of th' Lazy S gang. You know what happens to fellers that know too much, an' act too smart? We treat Larry just like we've allus been treatin' him. You savvy that?" he mimicked as he whirled to ride on.

"You got a hell of a cheerful disposition!" shouted Pecos, and rocked in his saddle with laughter.

Al Lennox rode steadily forward at a lope, oblivious of the passing scenery, his mind far from the valley. He was so oblivious that it needed the second sharp command to check him and to bring him back to his present whereabouts.

His expression of surprise framed an open mouth, and for a moment he was stunned into immobility; but had he been in the most alert mental condition it would have availed him nothing. He was looking squarely into the muzzle of a gun not five paces away. And back of the muzzle, and above it, a five-pointed star

glittered coldly in the early light.

Slowly Al's hands went up, since there was nothing else they could do; slowly the deputy rode forward, the gun never shifting, never wavering. He was treating this man entirely differently from the way he had treated the last one, for by every means known to him he was discouraging a draw.

"What's all this?" asked Al, his face suddenly flushing.

"Yo're under arrest," answered Mesquite, his left hand slipping into a side coat pocket. The two horses were now side by side, the gun pressing into the rustler's groin. "Gimme yore wrists, Al. Hold 'em out."

Al hesitated and felt the gun push into his flesh. He sighed and obeyed, and the double click rang out sharply. Mesquite's left hand moved swiftly from the cuffs to the prisoner's holster and emptied it. He jammed the gun inside the waistband of his trousers and backed off.

"Start ridin'," he ordered. "I'll tell you where to turn. You want to see yore brother?"

"Damn you!" cried the captive, squirming in the saddle.

"Set still; yo're goin' to see him before night," replied the deputy, a smile showing for the first time. "We got him th' day he quit th' country. He's all right, Kid."

"Got Charley? He's all right?"

"Yes; Bill Tucker's ridin' herd on him. He ain't even scratched."

"Oh, hell. Life's a rotten game," sighed the prisoner, knowing what capture meant for Charley.

"Reckon it gets its colourin' from them that plays it," growled the deputy. "Turn to th' left, up this cañon, Kid. That's right."

"But, say!" exclaimed Al, all at once remembering something concerning himself. "What you arrest me for? What have I done?"

"You'll have to ask th' sheriff, I reckon. I'm only a deputy."

"If Haskins expects me to tell him anythin' ag'in' Charley, he can go to hell."

"Good kid; also, a smart kid."

"But you can't arrest me just for that!"

"Mebby I can't; but I have, all th' same. Foller that ledge over there."

They climbed in silence, and when they reached the top, and the level plateau stretched away on three sides, Mesquite pushed up even with his prisoner, but a dozen feet from him.

"Don't try to make a run for it, Kid. I never miss, an' shore as hell I'll shoot. Th'

hoss first, th' rider next. That stops Injun ridin' right sudden."

"I won't try it. I want to see Charley," replied Al. He shook his head. "But, just th' same, you ain't got no right to arrest me just because I'm his brother."

"I know it, Kid; but there's such a thing as material witness; but now that we're out of that cañon an' things ain't likely to break wrong ag'in' me, I'll tell you that yo're arrested for rustlin'. Yo're th' third I've picked up."

"Who's th' second?" asked Al, with eager curiosity.

"Th' feller that was sent out to trail an' kill Charley, so Charley wouldn't get arrested an' talk too much."

"What? Sent out to kill Charley? What you mean?"

"Just that. Pecos an' Bull figgered Charley wasn't no good, would get caught, an' would peach on th' rest of th' gang. They sent Larry to find him an' kill him. They wanted his mouth shut tight." He fell back a length. "Turn to th' right here, Kid."

"I don't believe it! It's a trick to make me talk," growled the prisoner.

"I don't care whether you believe it or not," retorted Mesquite; "an' nobody gives a damn whether you talk or not. I'm just tryin' to treat you decent an' let you know what kind of a gang you've been playin' with."

"So you got Larry?"

"Yeah."

"Well, he won't talk, neither!" snapped Al.

"Yo're right, Kid; he won't."

"An' I'll damn soon find out if he went after my brother to kill him!" growled Al, his eyes blazing.

"Why, shucks, Kid. Charley don't know nothin' about that. How can he?"

"But Larry will!" snapped the prisoner. "An' I'll make him talk!"

Mesquite shook his head.

"He won't talk."

"Oh, won't he?" sneered Al, and laughed; and the sound of the laugh was calculated to raise hackles.

"No, he won't," replied Mesquite calmly. "There's a pile of stones over him, so th' wolves an' coyotes won't dig him out."

His talkin' days are all over."

"He's *dead*?" demanded Al incredulously.

"Yeah, he's dead. He was a gunman, out huntin' notches."

The prisoner shook his head and rode on in silence.

Jim Conover was glad to see them, but this time he was not surprised, for by now he had learned the names of the gang, or guessed them from the identity of those accounted for. He grinned at them and nodded to the prisoner.

"Too bad, Kid; but yo're luckier than Larry, th' damn coyote," he said.

"Take this kid to his brother, Jim," ordered Mesquite without dismounting. He glanced at the cuffs on Al's wrists. "Lend me yore cuffs, Jim, or change 'em quick. I want to get back ag'in."

Jim handed over his own pair and did not bother about hunting for the key, since any one of the keys unlocked any of the handcuffs that Haskins had in his office. He did not even look at them as he took them out of his pocket, and Mesquite, his eyes on the prisoner, shoved them into his own pocket without giving them a glance. No one knew that the key was in one of the locks and that now Jim had no way of opening the cuffs. It is on such small and unintentional things that Fate often builds her dramas, and it was to be so in this case. Jim turned, went to his horse, saddled up, and in a moment was back again. He grinned at his brother deputy, looked at the prisoner, and waved his hand.

"All right, Al; straight ahead," he ordered.

They left the camp and crossed the little ridge, and then Al's roving gaze caught and fixed on a long, rough pile of stones, and he glanced from it to Jim, and back again.

"That Larry, Jim?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yeah, Kid; that's him. Mesquite throwed down on you *before* he spoke, didn't he?"

"Why, yes; yes, he did," answered the prisoner, his expression indicating curiosity. "Why?"

Jim nodded knowingly and glanced again at the pile of stones.

"Reckon he kinda likes you, Kid: yo're lucky. He kept his guns in th' leather when he told Larry to put up *his* paws. You see, he knowed what Larry was ridin' off to do; an he knowed what Larry would be likely to do if he had an even chance. Larry got it, made his play on an even break—an' there he is, out there, toes up."

He pushed up even with the rump of the prisoner's horse.

"Turn to th' left here, Kid. That's th' shortest an' quickest way to Charley."

"If I reckoned that Bull an' Pecos sent Larry gunnin' after my brother," growled the prisoner, "I wouldn't rest till I got 'em both!"

Jim had dropped back again and now was riding squarely behind the captive.

He smiled to himself: Al was hardly in a position to get anyone, nor would he be for several years, if ever. He thought of Bill Tucker and that officer's increase of responsibility. If things went on as they had started, Bill was due to be kept busy; and not only that, but Bill ought to have help. Al was a very loyal brother, and he knew that Charley's trial would end in the death sentence. He could be counted upon to take any desperate opportunity that presented itself to free the killer of Tobe Ricketts. It might be well to anticipate events and to ride to Desert Wells as soon as he turned over his prisoner. A wakeful guard ought to be on duty every one of the twenty-four hours. Having made up his mind to do this without fail, Jim dismissed the matter from his mind, pushed ahead a little faster, and ordered his companion to do the same.

"Do you honestly believe that Larry was sent out to kill Charley?" suddenly asked the prisoner, turning in the saddle to look back at his guard.

"I shore do; an' I'm damn glad he went for his gun when Mesquite stopped him," replied Jim with apparent satisfaction. "When a man turns on a partner he oughta be shot. You keep a-goin', Kid: I got other things to do before dark."

Al obeyed, his mind busy with his new problem, and mile after mile his memory searched the words, looks, and events of the past week, seeking for inflections, glances, cryptic phrases, and anything else that would indicate the truth; and by the time the little shack came into sight he had made up his mind that Bull and Pecos were not fit to live.

Mesquite returned to his camp, and soon thereafter was in his regular place on the rim of the bluff. Both Bull and Pecos were with the herd, to keep each other company, like as not, since they rode together. From time to time one or both would look toward the west in expectation of seeing the Lazy S outfit ride into view. The afternoon dragged along, and with the passing of the hours their restlessness increased. Then it was time for Pecos to ride in and to prepare supper, and Bull was left to himself. His gaze was now fixed almost steadily upon the top of the highest rise between himself and the cañon, and Mesquite could well imagine the nature of his soliloquy. It appeared that Bull had been growing steadily more disgusted, and at last he let his rage nullify the ceaseless riding of the gang since the first new cattle came into the valley.

Mesquite saw him raise a stiff arm and shake a fist at heaven, saw him tear off his big hat and slam it on the ground, saw him drop swiftly over the side of the horse, retrieve the headgear; and then his horse shot forward in an agonized leap and ran like a mad thing for the hut and the corral, Bull quirting and spurring like a man bereft of sense. After all the careful herding, Bull now left the cattle to do as they pleased, to mix as they would, and raced for the house.

Pecos heard the clatter and sensed that something was wrong. He ran to the door as his partner drove the crazed horse up the bench and on toward the corral. For a few moments horse and rider had it out with bared teeth and open hatred, but the rider won, and savagely kicked the bleeding ribs as the animal entered the corral; its reply was flattened ears, a squeal of rage, and a pair of flashing hoofs that missed their mark by inches only.

"—— —— you!" yelled Bull, reaching for his gun; but he found his wrist gripped, and he turned a contorted face to peer into that of his companion. "An' you, too! Let loose that wrist!"

"Don't be a fool!" said Pecos, gripping all the tighter. "Get hold of yoreself an' tell me what's th' matter!"

"Tell you what's th' matter!" shouted Bull, stubbornly stiff and unyielding. "Let go that wrist!" He surged mightily, swung halfway around, and his imprisoned arm twisted suddenly, breaking Pecos's grip as if it were that of an infant. There was a flash and roar, another, and another; and the third shot, rage directed, found the mark. The horse went straight up into the air, balanced an instant, and crashed back to earth.

"There, —— —— you!" yelled the maddened man, and whirled on Pecos, his eyes blazing; but Pecos thought greatly of his hide and his health, and as Bull whirled a gun muzzle was jammed against his ribs.

They stood toe to toe, nose to nose while one might count five, and then Bull sighed, relaxed, and jammed the gun into its holster. Without a word he walked forward toward the hut, pushing against the gun at his ribs, which now fell away as its owner stepped back to let the other pass. The angry man stamped to the bench outside the door and dropped upon it heavily. He took off his hat and rubbed his head, and then, leaning back against the wall, slowly faced his wondering and still motionless partner.

"Well!" said Pecos, moving slowly forward. "Well," he repeated, his eyes on the tired man on the bench. "Where'd you git it?" he asked.

"Get what?" snapped Bull, with deep interest.

"Th' loco," answered Pecos, still moving slowly toward the bench.

"Don't get smart!" warned his companion.

"Never expect to be," said Pecos. "I was only tryin' to figger what was wrong with you, an' judgin' it honest, from every angle, loco was th' best answer. What's th' matter? What did th' horse do?"

"Do? You saw it! He kicked at me an' near got me!"

"An' he was a better shot than you, for he only had one try," said Pecos; "an'

he was only givin' what he got. It would 'a' served you right if he'd nailed you. Do you know that you missed two clean shots at less than ten feet?"

"Hell, I couldn't hardly see," growled Bull. The momentary lassitude faded, and he sat up with a sudden show of energy. "I kinda went off my head."

"You kinda did," acquiesced Pecos, grinning. "If you went much further you might 'a' been crowned head of Europe for th' rest of yore life, or Moses, or a steam engine. Yo're goin' to git one of them fits of rage once too often, some day. What th' hell was th' matter with you, anyhow?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, I kept a-waitin' for them damn fools to show up," growled Bull, moving restlessly. "Kept a-waitin' an' a-waitin', expectin' to see 'em any minute. An' I was thinkin' of other things, too: Charley quittin', Larry goin' after him an' not comin' back; then Al goes to th' Lazy S, early this mornin', an' he's takin' all day for it. Everythin' kinda all run together an' got mixed up. An' then it sorta exploded. It just blowed up, an' I went with it." He sighed, and his roving glance settled on a point out in the valley. "Yeah, there they go, spreadin' an' mixin' to hell-an'-gone."

Pecos glanced at the moving herd, its units wandering as they pleased.

"All right, Bull; let 'em go," he said casually. "I don't see why me an' you should do all th' work ourselves. Let th' Lazy S gang handle 'em from now on. We've done our share, everythin' considered. But, Bull, that was th' best hoss we got. You shouldn't 'a' shot it."

"Oh, I know that," muttered Bull. His face reddened again under its layers of tan, as a slower, more rational anger grew within him.

"Pecos, there's shore goin' to be a showdown when Larry an' Al get back."

"That's my idear, Bull. But don't you fly into one of yore fits of rage where you make two clean misses at ten feet. That hoss didn't have a gun to use; but them fellers will. Don't you fly into any rage, an' don't you take yore eyes off of Larry for a second—not a second!"

"I'll do better'n that! I'll have my gun on him before I say a word. Th' damn, deadly sidewinder! I'll give him a notch that won't fit on th' handle of his gun!"

"Better hear what he has to say, first," counselled Pecos.

"Th' hell with what he has to say!" snapped Bull.

"Well, don't blame you much. Things shore have gone to hell," said Pecos. "We never had such a run of hard luck." Then his face brightened. "Come on, Bull; get hold of yoreself. Things will be runnin' as smooth as a snake's back after Rankin an' his crew gets here. Just look at them cattle. We've never made a drive like this one's goin' to be. An' there's somethin' else you don't want to forget, Bull; old Tight-Fist ain't paid us for that last three hundred head. We'll collect that before

he gits this drive, an' that means seventy-five hundred dollars to be split among three less hands—Charley, Al, an' Larry won't be in it now. Suppose things have been goin' wrong: it could be worse, couldn't it?"

"Yes. They ain't as bad as they might be. But there's one thing that's bad: it's gettin' purty late for Tight-Fist to get things fixed up to send this herd up th' trail. We'll mebby have to wait for him to pay us for these. If we do it'll be our own fault."

"Wait nothin'!" snapped Pecos. "If he ain't got it, then he can borrow it. We're all done with waitin'."

He turned and faced the hut, looking through the doorway with unseeing eyes. Then he abruptly came back to the present.

"Guess everythin's ready, Bull. Let's go eat."

Bull slowly arose, and then remembered something. Standing, he drew his Colt, punched out the three empty shells, and reloaded the chambers. Then, looking once more out over the valley with its shifting cattle, he followed his partner into the house. His fit of rage had only increased their difficulties.

Up on the rim of the bluff Mesquite wriggled back and made his way to camp. He counted on getting a full night's sleep, for now it would not be necessary to make the trip down the ledge. He could go down and capture both men as they slept; but this he could not afford to do. He wanted the Lazy S outfit undeniably hooked up to these rustling operations, hooked up physically, hooked up so closely that no jury could doubt their share in the criminal operations going on. If he captured both men there would be no one to get Bruce Rankin and his crew to help with the stolen herd. It would only be a matter of time before one of the men below would ride in to the Lazy S; perhaps early the next day.

CHAPTER 18 - BROTHERS REUNITED

Jim and his prisoner rode up the twisting little arroyo and left it close to the ridge at its head. As they topped the rise the shack lay before them on its farther slope. Two horses grazed at a distance. The rear of the shack was toward them, and they rode down and around its eastern end, dismounting before the door.

Bill Tucker had left the window, through which he had observed them as they rode down the slope, and he now stepped out to meet them. He did not appear to be at all surprised by the identity of the second prisoner, although he gently shook his head in regret.

"Hello, Kid," he said, smiling a little.

"Hello, Bill; how's Charley?" replied the other somewhat anxiously.

"Full of beans an' bacon an' rollin' a cigarette. Mesquite get you, too, Kid?"

"Yeah. How come he's a deppity? How does he fit into this part of th' country? I heard he'd gone back to Texas, where he belongs."

"Reckon he didn't go," said Bill gravely, stating an obvious fact. "Don't seem like it, anyhow."

"Al, you got any decent tobacco?" said a querulous voice in the house.

"Yes, Charley; how you makin' it?"

"All right, I reckon," came the growled answer. "If I ever get out of here I'll make that damn coyote wish he *had* gone back to Texas!" There was an unintelligible growl. "He'll be willin' to *walk* there, if I get out."

Bill glanced swiftly at his fellow deputy and smiled knowingly.

"He must 'a' throwed down on you before you knowed he was there," he suggested, and both officers humorously awaited the reply.

"Had me cold," growled Charley, the thin sound of moving steel links accompanying the words. "Had me so cold I couldn't make a play. Bill, yore tobacco is chock full of sliced stems. They ain't tobacco stems, neither. Tastes like hay."

"Try th' sack, then," suggested Bill. "Is this th' first time you ever smoked any of that kind?" he asked, humouring his charge.

"Hell, no; th' country's full of it. What kind you got, Al?"

"Longhorn," answered Al, and looked inquiringly at his guard.

"Shore, Kid; go on in," said Jim, grinning; "but if you want to come out ag'in, you'll have to ask Bill: he's th' boss." He turned to that person. "Well, I've turned him over to you. Come on over here a ways: I want to talk to you."

Bill quietly reached out, took the reins of the two horses, and led the animals after him as he walked away from the building.

Jim paused suddenly and whirled around, his eyes on the shack.

"Where's yore rifle?" he asked in a tense, low voice, his hand on his gun.

"Well, it ain't in there," answered his brother in arms, going past with the horses and soon stopping. "What you want?"

"Where do you keep th' key of th' cuffs?" asked Jim.

"Hangin' onto a sage bush out back."

"I'll ride into town an' get one of th' boys to come out an' spell you. You got two of 'em to watch, now."

"I know it. I can watch 'em."

"But you've got to sleep!"

"I know it. I can sleep."

"But they might get away then."

"They won't get away then."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Jim was becoming a little exasperated, and he began to show it.

"Al will take a long chance to get Charley free," he warned.

"I know it."

"But how'll you make out at night?" demanded Jim, his voice rising.

"All right. Don't get ringy."

"—— ——" said Jim.

"Ain't no need to swear. They won't get away."

"But don't you want somebody to spell you?"

"I got enough to cook for now, with more comin', mebby. Take two fellers on guard, each kinda figgers that th' other feller has done it; an' then there comes a time when it ain't done a-tall. One's better."

"Done what?" asked Jim with pardonable curiosity.

"Why, anythin'; anythin' that should oughta be done. Makes trouble, two does." Then Bill's placid countenance brightened. "If you want to go to town, you can. We're near out of tobacco."

"You'll be a damn sight nearer out, then," said Jim, swinging into his saddle. A rowel pricked gently, and the horse went up on its hind legs, dropped, swung, and shot away, wrapping Bill in a cloud of dust.

Bill looked after the departing deputy and watched him until he went over the ridge. Then he scratched his head, mounted slowly, and rode back to the hut, a matter of fifty paces. He stripped the gear off and turned the horse loose with a resounding slap on the shoulder. As he entered the door of the house everything turned black. His prisoners had chosen the one moment when he would most likely be off his guard, when the other deputy barely had dropped out of sight.

Bill opened his eyes and looked around. He was alone, and his head seemed about ready to split open. A trickle of blood near an eye tickled him, and he raised a hand to brush it off. Then he became conscious of the cuffs. Both hands went up, attended to the blood, felt around on the top of his head and came down again. It seemed to be quite a cut, and a bump had formed under it. He looked down at the cuffs. They must be the pair he had carried in his pocket.

Arising, he staggered, steadied himself, and tried a short step. It was successful and he took another. He was encouraged by this and slowly made his way to the door, where he leaned in the opening and watched two handcuffed men trying to capture a horse, which they had been doing for nearly half an hour, and by now they had succeeded in making the animals even more skittish than they had been in the beginning.

He was very hazy in his mind, and thoughts did not connect very well; but when his knees suddenly buckled he had sense enough to grab the door frame and let himself down easily. He should have gone straight for the rifle when he had the chance to make it; and the thought stayed with him. He wrestled with it, being greatly troubled by all kind of strange ideas, ideas which persisted in crowding in ahead of the one on which he wished to dwell. He could crawl on his hands and knees, after a minute or two; but he could not remember where the weapon had been hidden. Then it came to him: it was in Desert Wells, being repaired. His hands shifted to his right thigh and found the holster empty. This required an explanation, and he strove to find one. The other thoughts came crowding back to push in and get in the way, but finally the solution came to him. The gun had been taken by someone. Another thought intruded in connection with this, and he laughed aloud. Blackness descended again.

The damned horse was walking all over him, but seemed to prefer his stomach. It kept one hoof on the tender spot, just below the parting point of the short ribs. For a big horse it was not very heavy, but it kept pushing down on that one hoof. He squirmed to roll away, to get out from under it, and then he opened his eyes. His legs were bound with a forty foot lariat, wound around and around and around; and the end of the rope was tied to the cuffs, holding his hands down between his knees. Right in front of him was a face, close to his own. He blinked, shook his aching head, wished he had not done so, and then smiled.

"Hello, Al," he said. "Where's that damn' horse?"

"Where's th' key?" demanded Al tensely.

"I must 'a' been right sick," said Bill, fighting back a groan.

"Where's th' key?" persisted Al, suddenly moving his arm.

Bill drew back against the wall he rested against and glanced down. A big Colt was being pushed into his stomach. He chuckled, for it was not a horse at all.

"My mistake, Al. It was a Colt instead of a horse."

This struck him as being very funny, and he laughed at his own wit; and felt his senses returning with a rush. He always knew that he was a tough one.

"You got my gun," he accused, and then noticed Charley on a box near the door.

He looked down again at the Colt and began to laugh, to laugh immoderately, as if there was some joke which only he understood.

"Where's th' key?" demanded Al for the third time. "Bill, I've knowed you for a long time; but if you don't give me that key I'll pull th' trigger!"

Bill laughed again, apparently senselessly.

"You've knowed me too long to do a thing like that, Al. This is one hell of a note you've got us into. You boys have got to help me cook, now, after cuffin' me with my own cuffs. You shouldn't 'a' cuffed me up like this."

"Bill, I'm goin' to ask you just once more: where is that key?"

"Jim's got it. An' me a-wonderin' who took my gun."

Al stood up and stepped back two paces, slowly raising the weapon, his gaze fixed steadily on the eyes of the man before him; and he was surprised by the look of intense curiosity which the act brought to the deputy's face.

"I'll give you just one more chance to hand over that key," said Al, his face wearing a frown and his voice nearly cracking. "We've searched you an' we've searched th' house. Now, then, you spit it out: *where is it?*"

"Jim said I was too careless to keep it. You'll have to wait till he comes back. I ain't got it." As an afterthought he added: "An' I am too careless, too; I shouldn't 'a' come in that door like I did. Jim is right."

"Damn Jim! Damn th' door! Damn you!" swore the man with the gun. "We can't stay 'round here all week, an' I can't shoot you, an' you know it!"

"I'm right glad to hear you say that, Al. It'll mebby help you in court. Anyhow, you didn't even try to shoot me, which wouldn't 'a' done you no good, nohow, seein' th' gun ain't loaded."

"Ain't loaded!" exclaimed Al in amazement. "Ain't loaded!"

He moved his hand a little as he glanced down. The copper rims gleamed dully between the end of the cylinder and the cheek.

"Well, it's loaded enough for me, I reckon; an' it's loaded enough to raise hell with anybody that follers us."

"You goin' away?" asked Bill curiously. Then he shook his head, and again he wished he hadn't. "It looks loaded," he admitted, after a moment's thought. "Them's empties. I figgered it didn't have to be loaded as long as it looked like it was; an' it mebby was better like that, me an' Charley bein' so friendly. He might grab it outa th' holster when I wasn't lookin'. It ain't no good a-tall. You boys shore have got to help me cook an' wash dishes. Serves you right, too."

Al was staring with vast disbelief into the harmless chambers, and he suddenly

cursed. Then the frown lightened as his hand touched the cartridges in the loops of his belt.

"Bill, you shore are a dumb fool," he said, grinning.

"Now, Al," reproved the helpless deputy, "you been a-listenin' to th' boys talkin' about me in town. That gun ain't no good: it's empty."

"We'll soon change that," growled Al. "You shore are dumb, Bill; an' so is that smart Aleck Mesquite feller: he took my gun, but he left me my belt an' ca'ttridges; an' th' loops are full."

"You allus was lucky, Al," said Bill, but he was slowly shaking his aching head. "You allus was, before you joined up with that Ace of Clubs gang; but you ain't lucky no more. Not no more, Al."

"That so?" sneered Al, rapidly pushing out the empty shells. "I'm lucky enough to have a belt full of ca'ttridges to use on you, or on any damn coyote that follers Charley an' me."

"I never could see why anybody changed over to th' .45," said Bill. "That there gun of mine shoots th' best damn ca'tridge that was ever made for a six-shooter. There ain't nothin' as good as th' old .44-40."

Al's face was a study. His expression started by being blank, changed swiftly to surprised incredulity, and finished with vexatious disgust. He looked at the last shell as it slid into his hand, and swore with deep feeling as he hurled it to the ground. The gun was the old .44-40, shooting the famous Winchester cartridge, while every loop of his belt held a .45.

"Hardest shootin' ca'tridge of th' hull lot," said Bill proudly. "An' I had th' sense to know it. You hit me right hard, Al," he accused. "Too hard, mebby. My head feels funny. You can find plenty of .44's in town. Murphy keeps 'em."

"Then that makes one more thing you've got to hand over," said Al, his anger mounting. "Th' key, th' ca'ttridges, an' yore rifle; an' yo're goin' to hand 'em over pronto!"

"I'm such a dumb fool that I ain't got th' key, th' ca'ttridges, or th' rifle," replied Bill. "Yes, sir; yo're luck shore changed when you joined in with that crowd, Al. I'll do th' cookin', an' you an' Charley can wash th' dishes an' clean up. You got us all into a hell of a mess."

Charley arose and walked casually to the shelf where the supplies were piled. He took down a butcher knife, tried its edge, and handed it to his brother.

"Keep him where he is, Al," he said. "I been usin' my eyes an' ears, an' Bill's done a lot of walkin' around outside. None of it was very far from this damn shack, neither. Reckon mebby I can find some of them things. His tracks will take me to

'em."

"Good for you, Charley!" exclaimed Al. He balanced the knife and got rid of the lack of teamwork of his hands by gripping his right wrist with his left hand. "You stay right on that box, Bill," he said. "I'll cut you to ribbons if you try to get up!"

"A knife makes an awful messy job," said Bill. "Blood flies everywhere. I'll stay here peaceable, Al."

Charley disappeared, and minute followed minute until half an hour went by; and then Charley came in again, sullen with failure.

Al read his brother's expression with one quick glance, and backed to his side, holding out the knife.

"You take this, Charley, an' watch him close," he ordered. "If he moves, use it. I'll see what I can do outside."

Charley took the knife, and his eyes gleamed a little, whereat Bill felt his first prickle of fear. He believed that Charley had gone a little loco, and a knife in the hands of such a man was not a pleasant thing to face. He sat as motionless as an image, and fervently wished for the return of the younger brother.

Outside the shack Al found a veritable puzzle of tracks. It appeared that at one time Bill must have been a wheelwright, or that he had descended from a family of wheelwrights, for the tracks he had made radiated, spokelike, in every direction from the building, and were bound together at their outer ends by a well-worn circle. There were twenty-two of these spokes, and there was nothing about them to fix on any one as against another. There was no sign of disturbed sand or earth, there was no pile of débris to serve as a hiding place for anything. Of course, so small a thing as a handcuff key could be hidden under almost anything; but a rifle needs space.

After an hour's fruitless search Al returned to the shack, searched it once more, and once more faced the deputy, both of them different from what they had been an hour before.

The deputy was obviously frightened and nervous after having spent an hour within a foot of a knife held in the hands of a man who was not sane, and who made faces and growled in his throat; the younger brother was now angry, apprehensive, and becoming more desperate with the passing of each minute. He had lost valuable time, time that might easily be the difference between his brother's life or death. He did not know at what moment some deputy might ride up to the shack, to be opposed by hands not only manacled, but empty of real weapons.

"Bill, I want that key, th' rifle, an' th' ca'ttridges for this gun," he said, his voice trembling and breaking from the tenseness of his overwrought nerves.

"Al, I ain't got th' key, as I told you," replied Bill, looking the other squarely in the eye. "I never had th' rifle out here, a- tall. Busted a spring in th' damn thing an' took it in to Zenas Carter to have it fixed. Jim came a-tearin' into town to git one of th' boys to come out here. I was th' only one he could find, an' I plumb forgot that th' rifle wasn't in its scabbard till I almost got here. Then I figgered I didn't need it anyhow, an' I was ashamed to let Jim know. On th' way out here I took five shots at a mangy coyote that sat on a hummock an' snickered at me. That is all I ever carry in th' Colt; an' when I felt along th' belt loops, damn if they wasn't all empty! Jim uses .45's, so I couldn't get none from him. Anyhow, I didn't need no gun, not with th' cuffs an' all th' ropes. I've been tellin' you that yore luck's changed, Al."

"I allus heard that you was a damn, blunderin' fool!" snapped Al, the deputy's notorious reputation recurring to him, a reputation based on more foolish performances than could honestly be claimed by any other man in the country, or any half-dozen men together. At last he was convinced that Bill was telling the truth, and it sent his anger up again. Here he and his brother were, free but for the cuffs. He was certain that he could get one of the horses if he went about it more carefully; but what good would it do them to ride off, handcuffed and weaponless? They would either starve or be recaptured the moment they showed themselves, unless they returned to the valley. In view of what had occurred the valley was a good place to keep away from. And then the answer came to him, and he smiled.

"Charley, I'm going out to make another try for a horse. You watch Bill right close. If he makes a break to get away, or anythin' else, use th' knife."

Bill squirmed uncomfortably, and the look of apprehension returned to his face.

"Al, hadn't you better stay here with me an' let Charley git them hosses?" he hopefully asked; but the last words were wasted, for Al had left the hut; and then Bill swiftly forgot all about Al.

Charley was trying the edge and balancing the knife, his eyes gleaming anew, and now a chuckle rumbled in his throat. It sounded horrible to Bill, and sweat beaded his forehead. He was certain that he sat face to face with a crazy man who entertained homicidal thoughts, the man who had shot Tobe Ricketts down in cold blood.

"Let's talk a little, Charley. Put down th' knife an' rest yore arms. I won't try to

git away. Give you my word that I won't try it."

"Mean that?" asked Charley, showing a little disappointment.

"Give you my word."

"Then I'll just rest it on my knee," said Charley, lowering the weapon. "Anyhow, it'll be closer to yore stomach, down there; an' th' stomach's a lot softer."

"Come to think of it, you better hold it up high, like it was," suggested Bill, his whole face now covered with sweat. "Al mebby won't like it if you change like that. Right shore he won't, Charley."

"I'll put it up ag'in when I hear him a-comin'," said Charley, grinning slyly. "Th' stomach's a lot softer."

To say that time dragged, judging it from Bill's standpoint, is to exaggerate greatly the speed of time's passing. It seemed very long, indeed, before the sounds of a walking horse broke in upon the hut's oppressive silence, and Al's face in the doorway was a really beautiful thing in the eyes of the sweating deputy. The young man's purposeful activity with saddle and bridle had Bill's heartfelt good wishes, and when Al rode off to rope and bring back another horse, Bill wished him speedy success; and not much later his reappearance with the second horse was like balm to the deputy. The second horse was saddled and bridled in quick time, considering the handicap of the handcuffs, and then Al called to his brother.

"Bring that knife and come along, Charley. Pronto!"

Charley made a playful stab toward the deputy's stomach, made another which touched Bill's clothing, arose and left the hut. In another moment the sounds of their horses grew rapidly less. They were bound along Jim's back trail, to track him down and to cover him with a gun whose uselessness could easily be concealed, and to get his key and his weapons.

Bill sighed with relief, arose and crow-hopped to the door, his back bent, his hands still firmly held between his knees. His erstwhile prisoners were already out of sight over the ridge, but he was playing safe; they might return to catch him unawares. He hopped up the slope, stopping now and then to rest, his head booming with every jump; and as he reached the crest he saw, far away across the plain, two diminutive riders, heading northward. It looked as if they were following Jim, for they were riding squarely on his trail.

He found it much easier to hop down the slope, and he struck for the beaten circle of his big wheel. Along this he hopped, turned to follow one of the spokes, and stopped beside a greasewood, eyeing it eagerly. Before his eyes dangled the small key, and he took it in his teeth, tore it loose, and hopped toward the shack.

Ten minutes later he came out with hands and legs free, and made his way toward the remaining horse, which, luckily, was his own. It required no great effort to grasp the trailing rope, and he rode bareback to the hut.

Entering the building, he went straight to the water barrel, plunged his arm to the bottom and brought up a bottle which once had held pickles, but which now was full of .44-40's. These he put in his pocket and, picking up his riding gear, left the building. Two minutes later he was riding after Charley and Al. Two minutes after that he suddenly remembered that it had been a long time since he had enjoyed a smoke, and he reached for tobacco and papers. They were not there. He put his hand in another pocket and then searched himself swiftly. He had neither tobacco nor papers. He thought for a moment, and pictured the sack as it had looked when he had last seen it: it had been nearly a quarter full. Suddenly the explanation came to him and he loosed a heartfelt curse: Al and Charley had taken it! He applied the spur.

"Damn them fellers! Come on, you saw horse, *hit yore stride!*"

CHAPTER 19 - CONCERNING A KEY

The two brothers pushed on at a good pace, following a plain trail, their only thoughts at present to get rid of the handcuffs and to find arms and provisions. They both understood the part that Jim Conover played in the game, and they both realized that his camp was but a supply and relay point for the more active Mesquite. They both knew where that camp lay and what it looked like, for they both had been there, and in it they expected to find what they sought. Their own weapons were there, for that is where Mesquite had left them; but first and foremost in their list of needs was the key, without which they were helpless.

The fact that they had but one gun between them, and that temporarily worthless, was not to be considered as a bar to their plans; neither was the fact that they both were wearing wrist irons: as a matter of fact, both of these things were a spur instead of a deterrent. Their situation was so desperate that desperate efforts sank down to the plane of the commonplace. They had no choice but to go ahead. In their favour was the fact that Jim Conover had not even the remotest suspicion that they were anywhere in his vicinity, or even free from Bill Tucker's guardianship.

Up to now they had had no time for the exchange of confidences, but now Al found the opportunity to give his brother some real news.

"Charley," he said, turning to face his companion, "before we leave this part of the country we got a job to do. We got a couple of traitors to kill. Bull an' Pecos sent Larry after you to kill you. They figgered you'd get caught an' peach on th'

gang. Larry was to stop yore mouth with a bullet."

Charley's eyes gleamed with sudden rage, the rage of a killer who was a little unbalanced. His low curses died out, and words with meaning took their place.

"Then we got *three* to kill!" he snarled.

"No; Larry's dead. Mesquite got him."

Charley was rubbing his cuffed hands, and on his face was an expression of vindictive hatred.

"Bull!" he gloated. "Bull! Ha-ha-ha! He rode me, did he? He sunk th' spurs into me every chance he got! Bull! Ha-ha-ha! An' then he sent Larry off to kill me, did he? Ha-ha-ha!"

"We got to get th' key first," said Al, looking askance at his grinning brother, on whose face was an expression of animal cunning and animal cruelty. "We get our guns, ca'tridges, an' all th' grub we can carry. Then we head for th' valley. Th' job hadn't oughta take us very long. Before night we'll be on our way, th' slate clean. An' they'll never head us."

Charley's hideous smirk changed slowly as a disturbing thought entered his mind.

"Th' hut is watched, Al. That Mesquite feller came right around th' back of th' hut when he got me. He knows all about th' hut, th' valley, an' th' gang. We can't go there with him watchin' an' waitin' like he is. He's watchin' an' waitin' all th' time. We can't go there."

He rubbed his hands again, and again vindictive hatred passed over his countenance.

"We will go there, Al! We'll get him first. We got to get Mesquite, first of all. Then we can get Bull an' Pecos. We got to get Mesquite first!" He chuckled, and his brother shivered at the sound, for the first time allowing himself to suspect that he was riding with a madman, a man abrim with the lust to kill. "First, Jim; then Mesquite an' Bull an' Pecos! Ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha!"

Al shrank back, his mind busy with new and torturing problems.

"We don't have to kill Jim," he said earnestly. "Jim is a good feller, an' he was allus friendly, Charley. We don't have to go to th' valley a-tall, or bother with Mesquite. Can't you see it, Charley? If Mesquite knows all about that hut an' th' gang, he'll do our job for us. He'll get 'em all if he's let alone. He'll get 'em all for th' hangman! All we got to do is get th' key, our weapons, an' plenty of grub. Then we can leave this damned country an' be safe. We don't have to kill anybody an' waste a lot of time. Ain't that plain enough?"

"Mesquite first!" muttered Charley with insane relish. "Then Bull an' Pecos.

Bull, damn his soul! I told him! I told him! An' now I'm goin' to do it!"

"Charley!" expostulated his brother, frankly worried. "You've got th' wrong idear! We don't have to get any of 'em! Mesquite will do that for us. Can't you see it? *Can't you?*"

"No!" shouted Charley, his countenance wrinkled like that of an enraged animal. "I told Bull! Damn him, I told him, an' now I'm goin' to kill him! An' I'll kill *you* if you try to stop me!" A burst of horrible laughter filled the air, and he fell to rubbing his hands again. "Ride me, will he? Ha-ha-ha!"

Al was silent, filled with torturing forebodings. This brother whom he had tried to save was a wild animal. What could he do, what would the future bring forth? Dared he let him have his hands free? Dared he let him have a gun? If he got him away from this part of the country, what would happen, what would such a man do? And for mile after mile they rode on without speaking to each other, Al moodily thoughtful and silent, Charley making throaty noises, rubbing his hands, and talking to himself.

It was mid-afternoon when Al, who was leading the way, turned from the faint trail to seek a roundabout route through cover for a stealthy advance upon Jim's camp.

They left their horses tied to bushes and moved slowly and cautiously up a slope, some distance beyond which the camp lay. Al carried the .44 in his right hand, the left pushed up in front of the cylinder, two fingers on each side of the barrel masking the harmlessness of the weapon. The chain on the cuffs was just long enough to permit of this. The position was awkward, but so was any other position while the wrists were cuffed and chained together. Any man who chanced to be covered by the gun would find it natural enough under the circumstances. That left hand had to be close to the right, and it was purely a matter of personal choice just what position it would take. As it was it served to steady the weapon at the cost of powder burns; and it might be that powder burns would not be considered by a man in so desperate a situation.

Behind Al crept Charley, his face contorted, his eyes gleaming, moving as silently as any other animal. He had a fortyfoot rope in his hands, ready to do what little he could as his part of the venture. If it came to the worst he would die by a bullet instead of a rope, and thereby be a gainer, although he did not realize this. He would go quickly and not be tortured by jail, trial, and the grisly preparations of a hangman. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain. In his belt was the knife, ready to be driven or thrown if occasion should permit of its use.

Al, worried half sick with the increase in his problems, kept on resolutely, his brother following close behind him. For Jim Conover, Al had no personal enmity or sympathy; Jim was just something which existed, standing between him and freedom, and Jim's life or death in this desperate situation meant nothing; he had to be removed as a factor in the action, either temporarily or permanently, as his own actions directed. Jim's life was on the knees of the gods.

The advance upon the camp proved to be more difficult than Al had believed, for his memory of it recorded impressions which had been dulled at the time of their making by purely personal considerations, and certain conditions of the surrounding terrain which were vital had been ignored. Except in one place the brush was much thinner and more scattered than he had imagined, and the ground was smoother and freer from rocks and hollows and little gullies. The one exception, a narrow but dense finger of brush, lay in the wrong place, well within the arc of vision of the deputy, and therefore useless to Al.

The camp was in the open, between two gentle slopes which terminated in low ridges about two hundred yards apart. They could not creep down to the edge of the camp within close revolver range of the man who sat with his back against a saddle and gazed off into space. With an empty gun it was imperative to get so close that no man in his right mind would dare to gamble with the levelled weapon. The range had to be point-blank. This could not be achieved unless the deputy held his posture and did not look around.

Al stopped, checked his brother, and considered, all the time spurred by the knowledge that even the seconds were vital. If Jim drowsed, as he was almost certain to do unless he bestirred himself, it would be a simple task to capture him; but he could not wait for him to be so accommodating: time pressed, and they were menaced by Bill Tucker, who could in time free himself and get to town with the news.

They were now behind the seated deputy, out of his range of vision, and it might be possible to steal down the slope and cover him before he was aware of his danger. Possible or not, the attempt had to be made.

Al motioned for his brother to stay where he was, and cautiously began his advance upon the camp and its guard, torn between two courses of action. Should he trust to speed and cover the distance as quickly as possible to give the guard less time in which to become restless and look around? Should he place silence above speed? With a loaded revolver the first might serve, but his gun was empty, nothing more than a gesture, a threat. Anxiety, eagerness, the press of time,

tense nerves urged him to hasten, to get it over with; but caution, and harassed judgment counselled stealth and silence; and his control over himself was just sufficient to turn the balance in favour of the latter course of action.

Crouched, his two wrists as far apart as he could get them to keep the links of the chain taut and silent, he moved down the slope, zigzagging from bush to bush if it did not take him too far from the direct line; moving as swiftly as silence would permit, his gaze flicking from the ground before his feet to the man against the saddle, and down again to search out and avoid twigs and loose stones, he pressed on toward the camp.

In his mind there was no doubt as to his present status: he was an escaped prisoner taking the offensive, and death might easily be his portion if he failed.

Behind him, flat on the ground, his hat off and his head behind a sage bush, peering through it and over the crest of the ridge, lay his brother, his face working, his tongue licking his dry lips, and the nails of his fingers cutting into the palms of his hands from the intensity of the nervous strain. Of the two, demented as he was, Charley suffered most, since he did not have the boon of action.

Fifty yards, forty-five; forty yards, thirty-five; thirty yards, twenty-five—the deputy lazily pushed up his hat, stretched his legs, and felt for tobacco and papers. He was growing strangely restless. He yawned, and wished that he had something to do to get away from this wearying inactivity. Mesquite was having all of the excitement. Even Bill had a little, riding herd on the prisoners and having to keep awake and alert. He raised the cigarette toward his lips with one hand while he felt in a vest pocket with the other. It came out with a match as his tongue was about to moisten the edge of the paper—and then he froze, stiff from amazement.

"Up with 'em, Jim!" came a hoarse command from behind him in a voice that broke. It was very close to him, and its measure of desperation was full and understood by the stunned listener.

For a moment the deputy doubted his ears and remained as he was, left hand near the vest pocket, the other within three inches of his lips.

"Up with 'em!" said the voice, now cracking like the lash of a whip.

"All right, all right," said Jim resignedly, his hands moving slowly toward the sky, one holding a match; the other, an unmoistened cigarette from which tobacco spilled. "Up they are, Kid," he said calmly. "How'd you do it?"

"Stand up!"

"All right, all right. Up it is," acquiesced the deputy, slowly obeying, and felt a solid object jammed against his spine. It required no second sight to know what

it was. Then he felt an arm touch his side and there was movement at the buckle of his belt, but he did not glance down; he knew, too, what that was. In a moment he was relieved of the weight of about five pounds of steel, lead and leather. A hand slipped over him, from pocket to pocket, under each armpit, and even passed down the legs of his trousers.

"All right, Jim, you can put 'em down," said his captor, stepping back. "*Charley!*" he shouted.

Jim obeyed and turned slowly, very slowly so that his intentions would not be misread, and found himself looking into the muzzle of what he believed was his own gun. A glance at the empty holster at his captor's feet endorsed the thought, and it was still further endorsed by the gun which had been thrown away. Something about the discarded weapon made him look at it more closely, and he swore under his breath: the weapon was harmless; but the gun which covered him now had no such shortcomings: dull, greasy lead filled the end of each chamber. Prominent as this loaded Colt was, the manacles on Al's wrists were even more so. Glancing past Al he saw Charley hurrying down the slope, his wrists, also, handcuffed.

Charley arrived, dropped the rope, and let his locked hands fall on the handle of the knife in his belt. He shuffled slowly toward the deputy, a malignant grin on his face.

Al's quick step and darting hand came in time to tear the knife from the belt, and he hurled it as far as he could up the slope.

"Much obliged," said Jim, his hair settling down again.

"Search him for th' key, Charley," ordered the younger brother, the gun unwavering, his voice pitching high in nervous tension. This was the crucial moment, for everything hung on the key.

Jim relaxed, grinned, and shook his head.

"If Charley can find that, he's a better man than I am," he said. "You remember that I gave Mesquite my pair of cuffs right here in this camp before you an' me rode off? Well, I reckon th' key must 'a' been in one of 'em, for I ain't seen it since, an' I've shore hunted for it."

"Search him, Charley," ordered Al. "Th' one that Bill gave you will do us just as well. Go through him, Charley!"

"Th' one Bill gave me?" inquired Jim, a little surprised. "Well, all right—if he gave me one."

Al's face paled under its tan, for the deputy's words and look had the ring and look of truth. He gripped the gun all the tighter and almost trembled while his

brother carried on the search.

The search was thorough, even the deputy's tobacco sack being emptied and its contents examined. No key was found. Charley then turned to the camp equipment and supplies, but forgot what he was to do when he saw the captured rifles and revolvers at the foot of the pile. He grabbed a rifle, turned, and slowly raised the weapon, its sights lining up on the deputy's heart.

"*Charley!*" yelled Al, stepping in front of the deputy. "Put it down! We want the key! Find th' key, *Charley!*"

Slowly the other obeyed, grinning idiotically, and Al swiftly stepped aside, his gun once more on his prisoner. Charley puttered aimlessly about the supplies, his eyes mostly on the little pile of guns.

"You better do th' job yoreself," suggested Jim. "There ain't no key anywhere in camp, but you won't believe it. Get him away from them guns, Al, an' hunt for it yoreself."

"Charley, you come here; I need you a minute," called Al.

Charley bent down to pick up the rifle again, and Al turned swiftly to his prisoner.

"You promise not to try to escape?"

"Yes! For Gawd's sake, get that rifle away from him!"

Al ran forward at top speed, and reached Charley just as the heavy weapon was going to his shoulder. The younger man grasped it and tore it from his brother's hands. Then he got between the demented man and the other weapons.

"Come back with me, Charley!" he ordered, and pushed the partly resisting man before him. "I want you to tie Jim up so he can't get away."

"Gimme that rifle!" snarled Charley, his face working horribly.

"No! You want th' rifle to shoot Bull with! *Not Jim!* *Not Jim,* but *Bull!* You want it for *Bull!*!"

"Yeah, for *Bull!*" replied Charley, and he led the way voluntarily.

Both Al and Jim wiped the sweat from their faces and sighed deeply, and the latter spoke first.

"Good Gawd, Al! Do you reckon I'd try to keep you from gettin' that key with Charley like this? I wish you could find it an' take him away! I wish I had one to give you!"

"Then it ain't hid somewhere?" demanded Al, his spirits sinking to new and lower levels.

"No! Mesquite's got my key; an' Bill never gave me his'n! He kept his key on a

sage bush somewhere round th' shack. Right now he's ridin' like a wild man for town an' help. You both are escaped prisoners an' can be shot down on sight. If you'll take th' advice of a damn fool like me, you'll clear out an' go damn quick."

"But we ain't got a chance!" growled Al as his brother picked up the rope. Then his face cleared somewhat: there was just one more chance. Mesquite had the key that would unlock the cuffs.

The two brothers worked swiftly, and in a moment the deputy was trussed so thoroughly with forty feet of rope that he never could hope to release himself. This done, they hurried to the supplies, loaded themselves down with them, each took a rifle and a supply of ammunition, and hastened up the slope to return to their horses, Al squarely behind his brother, ready to fight to keep Jim from being shot. His anxiety on this score was needless: Jim was no longer in Charley's disordered thoughts. All he was thinking about was Mesquite, Pecos, and Bull.

"Mesquite hides behind th' hut," he panted. "Saw him come from there. He hides behind th' hut!"

"But he can't do that!" expostulated Al, stumbling and swiftly recovering his balance.

"Behind th' hut!" snarled Charley. "He come from there! Behind th' hut, I tell you!"

Al tried to straighten this out in his mind, and gradually the picture of the base of the cliff was clear to him. It was possible that Charley was right; the tumbled mass of detritus just west of the hut could hide a dozen men, so long as their presence was not suspected. As he thought the matter over it appeared to be much less impossible: Mesquite certainly had been close enough to the hut to learn the plans of the gang, or he could not have picked them up, one after the other, as they each had ridden on their missions. None of them was picked up in the same place, so he must have had certain knowledge. It also was certain that he had to be somewhere, and as long as they did not know just where that place was they could do nothing else but follow what scanty tips they had. They would try the hut, and if they did not find Mesquite, they might find a file in the building and be able to cut the chains.

"Mesquite, Pecos, *Bull!*" muttered Charley, sprinting ahead as the horses came into sight. In a few minutes they were in the saddle, their supplies made fast behind them, and rode as straight as they could for the cliff which overlooked the valley.

Jim began to wriggle as soon as the two men dropped from his sight, but he wriggled in vain. After a short, bitter struggle with the rope, in which he nearly

strangled himself, he relaxed and rested while he got his breath, lying quietly and facing unpleasant thoughts. He could lie here until he died of thirst, so far as any effort of his own could help him. Now he began cursing Bill Tucker, whose carelessness was responsible for his present predicament. The minutes passed slowly, and already his throat was dry and his thirst mounting. Then he began struggling again, but this time more purposefully. He found that by bridging he could push himself toward the supplies a few inches at a time; and near the supplies were the camp utensils, among them a sharp butcher knife. Hope sprang anew in his heart, and he persisted in his slow progress, resting a few moments after each half a dozen efforts. He had a job to do: he had to get free and go after the prisoners, to make good Bill's dereliction. In one of the resting periods, after he had covered half the distance, he heard a sound, and he rolled over like a flash to see what had made it, half expecting to discover Charley creeping toward him. It was not Charley, however. Bill Tucker was riding down the slope, following the usual trail. Bill waved his hand, and spurred forward.

"Th' damn big fool!" growled Jim, but he was grinning.

"Too bad they didn't have two ropes," said Bill, dismounting and pulling a knife out of his pocket.

"Too bad you ain't got some brains!" snapped the man on the ground. "How'd they git away from you?"

"Clubbed me when I stuck my head in th' door, but they didn't git th' key!"

"For a little while I was right sorry they didn't!" retorted Jim. He sighed. "They didn't get one here neither."

"Hell you say!" exclaimed Bill, cutting diligently. "How'd you save it?"

"Mesquite's got it," answered Jim, moving one freed arm. "They'll head for him, right now. You know where he is?" "No; hope they find him," growled Bill, freeing another arm. "Only hope they do! Then there'll be two less to bother about."

"What chance has he got, not suspectin'? If they get onto his trail they'll shoot him before he knows they are anywhere around," said Jim, sitting up. He was free now, and he jumped to his feet. "That Charley is a locoed killer. He'll shoot anybody he gits his sights on. He's crazy, a ravin' maniac! An' you know what he can do with a rifle!"

"You don't have to tell me nothin' about him!" snapped Bill, shivering. "I sat with his damn knife only a couple inches from my belly. Has my hair turned white?"

"If yourn ain't, mine has!" retorted Jim with feeling. "We got to get busy, right quick, an' foller 'em; an' you listen to me, you big fool: don't take no chances with

Charley! Don't take none a-tall! Shoot on sight, an' shoot quick an' straight. He's worse than a crazy rattler."

"I'd feel better if I had my Colt," growled Bill. "We might bump into 'em in th' brush, too close up for a rifle to be any good."

"Yore Colt!" sneered Jim insultingly. "Yore Colt! I'd like to jam that damn gun down yore throat! Yore Colt!" "There ain't no better gun made," replied Bill, and then he slyly grinned. "Even when it's empty, there ain't."

"That so? Well, lemme tell you," said Jim, his flush showing through the coat of tan, "all guns feel alike when they're jammed into th' small of yore back. In th' first place, they had no business to be free, an' in th' second, how in hell did I know it was empty?"

"Wish I had it," muttered its owner, his hand rattling a pocketful of cartridges. "A new one will cost me half a month's pay."

"You can have it an' welcome!" replied Jim. He flung out his arm. "Yore gun is layin' in th' sand, clost to my saddle, where Al threw it away, you big flathead!"

Ten minutes later the two deputies, fully armed, were in the saddle and riding on the trail of the men they sought, eyes ahead, every sense alert, their nervous fingers on the triggers of their rifles, and in the mind of each was the quiet determination to take no chances whatever with Charley, a homicidal maniac. To see him would be to shoot, instantly and straight. They pressed on, but at not so rapid a pace as that set by the escaping fugitives, not at so rapid a pace as to blunder into an ambush set for Bill and the deputies he was supposed to be leading from town.

Jim wore a puzzled look and seemed to be cogitating. Finally he glanced at his companion.

"You got any idear a-tall where Mesquite is?" he asked curiously.

"Not none at all. Ain't you?" asked Bill.

"Sorta general idear," answered Jim, "but it don't mean nothin' to us."

"Then where are we goin'?" demanded Bill.

"We're goin' to th' only place we can go, an' I don't know where that is."

"Sweet land of freedom! I reckon we're due for a long ride!" said Bill with cutting sarcasm.

"All we can do is to foller Al an' Charley," said Jim easily. "They seem to know where he is. They oughta, anyhow."

"Yes, they oughta," said Bill musingly. "That's just what we got to do. We ain't lookin' for Mesquite, after all. We don't care nothin' about him as long as them

two fellers don't find him. If they do find him, then so will we if we foller them. An' if they don't find him it don't make no difference, because we can find *them*: an' that makes it all th' same."

"Shut up," said Jim irritably. "You make my head ache."

"We got to find that pair, Jim; we *got* to get 'em!"

"Yeah; to square up for yore damn carelessness!" growled Jim.

"No!" snapped Bill. "To put 'em where they belong!"

"You give me a headache," growled Jim, and he pushed into the lead, his gaze on the tracks of the fugitives.

CHAPTER 20 - HANDCUFFS UNLOCKED

In the mind of Charley Lennox the impelling thought was vengeance; his one desire, to kill. In that of his brother vengeance had ceased to be a factor, relegated into the background by the mental aberration of Charley, whose blood lust was likely to ruin what chances they had to escape and to bring about their capture or death. Yet Al was driven by necessity to follow his brother, for that was the only hope they had left to obtain a key for the opening of the handcuffs. As long as the cuffs were on their wrists they not only were handicapped physically, but they dared not enter a settlement or visit a ranch; they dared not go where they could find the tools necessary for the removal of the shackles. By now Al was as much opposed to having revenge on Bull and Pecos as he had been in favour of it; but Bull and Pecos indicated the proximity of Mesquite, and the latter they must find. So they pushed on at good speed in the direction of the high cliff behind the rustlers' hut, it serving only as a landmark and not in itself an objective. At the base of that cliff lay their real goal, the tumbled detritus in which Mesquite was thought to hide.

Neither of the brothers was familiar with the tableland on which they now rode, for neither had ever ridden over this part of it. Their journeying into this section of the country had been along the regular trail through the cañon and the valley; and so, when darkness fell and blotted out everything at any distance, they were forced against their wishes to make camp and to wait for dawn.

Behind them, using every precautionary safeguard against surprise and ambush, rode the two crestfallen deputies, both men of kindly dispositions, but now through the necessity of self-preservation turned into cold, calculating machines for killing. They were forced to go into camp earlier than the two they were trailing, for the tracks became uncertain when twilight deepened.

At the valley, Mesquite lay in his chosen position on the rim of the cliff, idle,

killing time until he received another cue for action. Bull's exhibition of rage had been diverting, and the deputy waited for the next move. He had not planned to go down the cliff that night, since there was nothing to be learned, nothing to be gained; and he believed that either Bull or Pecos would ride off in the morning for the Lazy S to get the help that Al had failed to obtain. As the afternoon died and twilight began to settle, Mesquite returned to his camp, had his supper, and soon thereafter rolled up in his blanket to get a full night's rest.

At his accustomed hour in the morning he was back on the rim, peering down into the valley. Smoke came from the chimney below him, and in less than an hour Pecos and Bull left the building and wandered out toward the corral, Pecos carrying his riding equipment. Saddling, he rode inside, put his rope on the dead horse, and dragged it out to the edge of the bench, where he left it for the time. He and Bull talked for a few minutes and then the cook whirled and rode slantingly down the bench, heading for the upper end of the valley, the cañon, and the east line of the Lazy S. Bull watched him for a few minutes, glanced at the dead horse, shook his head slowly, and went back into the hut.

Mesquite tingled and was filled with satisfaction. He made no effort to intercept Pecos as he had intercepted Al, for now he was ready to let the game go on, to couple up without doubt Bruce Rankin and his outfit with the rustling operations. If the game developed into something too big for him to handle with certainty, he would have plenty of time to ride to Jim's camp and to send that person to Desert Wells after the sheriff and a posse. It would take the rustlers two days at least to run the necessary brands and to cut out and round up the trail herd. Time must elapse for the new iron burns to heal, if they intended to include any of the latest animals in the drive herd; it might be, however, that most of that time would be taken up on the trail, and the burns heal while the cattle were drifted along it. Whatever course the rustlers took would give him time enough to change his plans to coincide with theirs.

As he lay there lazily looking out over the valley, he caught a movement at the base of the cliff, some distance to his left, and he centred his attention upon it. In a moment a man, hidden by his big hat, moved out from behind a pile of rocks and crept along, searching from left to right and back again. Soon there appeared another figure, trailing the first, a rifle sticking out from under the brim of the hat.

Who could they be? Had Haskins learned something of what was going on out here? Had Jim ridden in and talked? He was trying to solve the riddle when one of the men below, the man in the lead, reached up to grasp the top of a boulder; and the early morning light glinted on a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs.

If Mesquite had been interested before, he was doubly so now. The only

handcuff wearers he believed to be anywhere in that part of the country were Al and Charley Lennox; but Bill Tucker was supposed to have them both safely held in the old shack. Could it be possible that they had escaped? From the evidence it was not only possible but very probable.

The man below began to climb the great rock, lost his footing, and slipped; but his grip held, and he lay on one side for an instant while he felt for a new foothold. His hat slipped from his head and rolled down to the ground; and to Mesquite's peering eyes there was for one moment revealed the face of Al Lennox. Then the other must be Charley.

Mesquite was doing some intense thinking. If he interfered he would make his presence known and ruin his plans; if he did not, then Bull would learn all about him and his activities and his plans would be ruined anyway. While he turned the matter over in his mind, seeking the best way out of a poor situation, something about the stealth of the two men impressed itself upon him, and another possible solution arose to be considered. It looked very much as if they were stalking the man or men in the hut; certainly they did not need to be so cautious in approaching former friends, unless they knew what Bull and Pecos had tried to do!

He had to make a choice one way or the other. The last possibility seemed as good as any other explanation he could find, and he determined to wait and to let the game unfold a little more. He had told Al that Larry had been sent off to trail and kill his brother, and the actions of the two men below him could be better explained on that understanding; but he was far from accepting that or any other answer as the definite solution of the problem. Before he could give it much more thought, Bull came out of the hut and stood in indecision at the corner, hidden by the building from the sight of the two wary stalkers; and the right answer soon came in quick, tense action.

Bull rolled a cigarette and wandered toward the edge of the bench, still hidden by the house. He appeared to be restless, to be killing time. He wandered aimlessly about, and then went toward the dead horse. After reaching it he shook his head and turned toward the corral, for the first time moving out beyond the shelter of the house.

Al Lennox had scrambled up on the boulder and was settling himself in a stable position, while Charley was moving through a mass of rocks at his right. In this position in relation to the hut, it was Charley who first caught sight of the man near the corral. His arms moved spasmodically, the rifle leaping up; but the movement must have registered on Bull's consciousness, for he looked quickly in that direction, and his hand dropped instinctively to his holster. Charley was

partly hidden by the detritus, but Al stood out plainly on the top of the boulder; and Bull's eyes, not having clearly seen the motion that had warned him, fixed instantly upon Al, the more prominent. At the crack of Charley's rifle Bull had his gun out, but he whirled and staggered back under the impact of the heavy bullet, and his own first shot was wild. Recovering his balance for an instant, he fired again, and Al, who risked falling from the boulder as he reached with both hands for the temporarily sheathed Colt, started convulsively and slid down the rock like a limp sack.

Charley fired again at a range that would have meant dead centre had he been in his right mind and not so frenziedly eager, but as it was the shot was very close to the mark. Bull staggered again, and fell to the ground, and as he did so, the maniac leaped from his shelter and ran forward, cursing and screaming at the top of his voice. Bull stirred, rolled over, raised his gun, and pulled the trigger, the last effort of a long and evil life.

Charley's cursing stopped as if it had been cut with a knife. His manacled hands rose straight up before him, the rifle flying through the air. For a moment he stood on tiptoe, like a swimmer about to dive; and then he pitched forward on his face and moved no more.

The swift tragedy was hardly ended before Mesquite was running to the trail down the face of the cliff, and he went down it at a speed that threatened to become a fall; but by good luck he reached the bottom without injury and ran to the first body. One look told him that Bull never again would steal cattle. Charley was next, and the crimson blot on the back of his shirt told of a shot that had passed through the heart on its way through and out of the body.

Mesquite, gun in hand, now hurried to the boulder, but with alert readiness to meet opposition. None came, and he turned the corner of the huge rock to see Al piled in a grotesque heap at its base. The sight he looked upon was not calculated to please, and he hastily covered what was left of the top of the head, using Al's sombrero. Second thought made him pause, and he stooped and removed the hat, putting it where it had been found. Men shot as Al had been did not put their hats on; and the dead man farther on could not have done so.

Mesquite stepped back, leaned against another rock, and considered this swift tragedy and its bearing upon himself and upon the rest of the gang; and the more he thought about it, the more certain he became that it would explain itself beyond the question of a doubt. He viewed it as it would have appeared to him had he come upon the scene without knowledge of the facts. He nodded his head and was about to turn slowly away when his gaze rested upon the handcuffs. There was a false note, there was a warning which must not be given. The cuffs

must not be seen. He stepped quickly forward, taking a small key from a vest pocket, and bent over what was left of the man who so desperately had needed that key. It took but a moment to remove the manacles and put them in his pocket, and he hastened back to the second body, and removed the other pair of cuffs. Looking over the hard ground where he had walked, he found that there were no signs of his passing, and he was about to start for the trail up the cliff when a hail acted upon him almost like fulminate upon powder. He leaped sideways and whirled while he was in the air, and when his feet touched the ground each of his hands was holding a Colt, the long-toothed hammers straining under his thumbs, and then he slowly lowered them and put them back into their sheaths.

The two men were in the open now, running toward him as rapidly as their high-heeled boots and the nature of the ground would permit. They both paused momentarily at sight of Al, but they kept on going, giving Charley but a glance. Red faced and out of breath they stopped before Mesquite.

"You shore—got them guns—out quick," said Bill admirably.

"Did you—get all—these fellers?" panted Jim, his eyes wide from incredulity.

"No; they got each other," answered Mesquite. "It was all over in a wink. An' I'll tell you somethin': Bull Tompkins might 'a' had th' name of bein' a bully, but he didn't die like one! He died like a man, an' he took two with him!"

"Yeah; an' one of 'em was ravin' crazy," said Bill, raising a sleeve to wipe the perspiration from his face. "They both was after you, to get a key for th' cuffs. Al would 'a' been satisfied to let you live, but Charley would 'a' killed you on sight."

"Well, reckon we better do somethin' with 'em," said Jim, looking around the ground. "Hadn't oughta let 'em lay here like this."

"Their friends, or enemies, can do that for 'em," replied Mesquite. "As they lay they tell a plain an' right convincin' story. They tell th' truth. If we touch 'em it won't be th' same story a-tall. You boys foller me an' don't go out of yore way to leave any tracks. I reckon yo're just about in time for th' big show; an' while I was figgerin' to run it myself, I ain't no hog, seein' that yo're here. Come on."

They looked about them again and followed the leader to the trail and up it. They reached Mesquite's camp, saw his horse, and both smiled.

"Lend me th' use of that cayuse," said one of them. "We left ourn quite a ways back from th' valley."

"All right, Jim; saddle up an' get 'em," replied Mesquite. "There won't be nothin' excitin' happen around here till Pecos gets back with th' Lazy S outfit. We've got plenty of time to wait an' talk. I'm right curious to learn how Al an' his

brother happened to be down there in th' valley. I reckon mebby Bill can tell me that?"

"I shore can; an' it's all my fault," growled Bill. He turned to his friend. "Saddle up an' git th' cayuse, Jim; I'll stay here an' confess my sins; an' I ain't a damn bit proud of 'em, neither." He scratched his head ruefully. "I'm admittin', however, that I feel a whole lot better about it now than I did an hour ago. What me an' Jim have been through since yesterday mornin' would make cripples outa any four men I know."

Jim rode off in high spirits, and Mesquite and Bill settled down in the shade of a cut-bank to wait for his return.

Bill told his story without interruption, and without excuses or any attempt at extenuation. At the end of the recital Mesquite stretched, shifted into a less cramped position, and smiled coldly. When he spoke he completely ignored Bill's mistake, and thereby made a friend for life.

"We've got th' luck on our side," he said reflectively. "Now that it's all over, it couldn't 'a' happened better. There's only one thing that might have been different, but when everythin' is considered, I reckon it's best th' way it is."

Bill nodded and looked inquiringly at his companion, wondering if that one thing was what he thought it was.

"Meanin' Al?" he inquired.

"Yes; meanin' Al," answered Mesquite. "Al got into th' wrong game mebby because his brother was already in it. I don't know that, but I'd rather believe it. There was a lot of good in Al, if he'd had a chance to break away an' start right. He was just out of luck. Everythin' broke ag'in' him. Of course, he was a cattle thief, plain an' simple; but he was a lot different from th' gang he trailed with. He broke th' law when he helped a murderer try to get away; but th' murderer was his own brother. Hell of a situation for a young feller to be in. He couldn't stand th' thought of Charley hangin', an' if he helped him, he became an accessory after th' fact. I ain't sayin' what I'd 'a' done in his place, or what you or Jim would 'a' done: but it's somethin' worth thinkin' about. Al was just out of luck. I reckon mebby he's better off like he is. You know what a jury would 'a' handed him. Yes, he's much better off."

Bill nodded and stirred restlessly during the pause.

"You don't want to forget, however," said Mesquite, his face growing cold again, "that Al was gettin' his bread an' butter at th' expense of an old lady made a widow by his brother. You don't want to forget that every dollar he got as his share of th' rustlin' was just a step nearer to th' poorhouse for old Mrs. Ricketts.

You want to keep that in mind, too."

"Yes, that's so," growled Bill uncomfortably, his opinion of Al Lennox shrinking considerably.

"Charley got what he deserved, only he didn't get it soon enough," went on Mesquite. "He never gave old Tobe Ricketts a chance for his life. If he'd killed Tobe clean with one shot it would 'a' been bad enough; but he didn't. He wounded th' old man desperately, an' then deliberately killed his horse, to let th' old feller face a lingerin' death out on a desert, without a drop of water to wet his bloody lips. That's what Charley did. His heart was rotten an' his soul was black, an' he's headin' for th' hottest part of hell. I'm right sorry that it wasn't me that killed him."

"Yeah, or me," growled Bill, shivering as he pictured the knife which had been so close to his stomach.

"Bull never counted with me, one way or th' other," said Mesquite. "I'd 'a' shot him at the first break an' not worried about it. I'd 'a' taken him alive just as quick. He, too, was sendin' Jane Ricketts to th' poorhouse as fast as he knew how; an' he knew how plenty good enough. But there's one feller that's worse than any of 'em; an' I'm only hopin' I get a chance to throw down on him. He'll never face a jury if I do."

Bill glanced sidewise at his companion's face and shivered a little as he hastily looked away. From something that Mesquite had said before he knew the name of the man referred to, but he held his tongue.

"As I was sayin'," remarked Mesquite, "things couldn't 'a' broke better for us. Our prisoners are out of th' way. Our hands are free. Th' story them three bodies will tell their partners won't hurt us a mite. It's a story that nobody can read wrong. Al an' Charley gunnin' for Bull, th' man that sent Larry Rankin off to kill Charley. Larry ain't showed up since, but Charley come back, an' he come on th' warpath. That's easy to understand. He got Larry, an' he learned all about it before Larry died. Then Al disappears an' throws in with his brother. It come to a showdown, an' they shot it out. There they lay, just as they fell; an' there ain't no handcuffs to take anybody's mind off th' evidence."

Bill chuckled and shifted again.

"Yeah, that's so," he said cheerfully; "an' we got th' cuffs back all ready to put 'em to work ag'in. Four pairs, ain't there, with mine?"

"Yes, four pairs," said Mesquite with great satisfaction. "Just th' right number."

Bill was doing some elementary mental arithmetic, and he looked curiously at his companion.

"Just th' right number?" he inquired. "There's four in th' Lazy S crowd, an' Pecos makes it five."

"Just th' right number," repeated Mesquite flatly, the frost appearing in his eyes. "I'm hopin' Bruce Rankin won't need his pair."

"I'll give odds that he won't," thought Bill, but he said nothing.

"When Pecos and his friends read that story," said Mesquite, "they'll have plenty to talk about, but it will end in talk. There's no reason for it to end any other way, no reason for them to be suspicious. Th' work with th' cattle will go on just th' same, till we stop it, an' now that we are three instead of one, we can stop it whenever we like, or not even let it start. If we don't let 'em work, them Lazy S coyotes can claim they ain't connected a-tall with any rustlin'. They can say they just rode in here for a drink of water, or to borrow a match, or make a friendly call, or any other damn fool excuse they think of." The speaker was becoming sarcastic. "Some juries will swaller almost anythin' an' call it a reasonable doubt. I don't want nothin' like that swallowed; I don't want no reasonable doubts a-tall. I want Rankin an' his men connected right tight to this rustlin', so tight that all hell an' th' lawyers can't get 'em loose. So I reckon mebby we better let 'em work th' herd th' first day an' drop down on 'em that night." He laughed contentedly.

Bill joined in with a hearty chuckle.

"Does make a feller feel right good, don't it?" he asked.

"It shore puts me in a right cheerful frame of mind," admitted Mesquite. "Comin' right down to cases, all I'm really interested in is th' Lazy S; an' I got a feelin' that th' Lazy S is goin' to be th' best ranch in this part of th' country in a few years. At first I hoped that my part wouldn't be knowed, that th' sheriff or one of you boys would get all th' credit; but there's no chance of that, now. Mebby it's just as well, though: I don't reckon th' Lazy S will be bothered much by cattle thieves as long as I'm workin' for it."

"Wouldn't be a heap surprised if they let you plumb alone," said Bill, chuckling.

"Hope so," growled Mesquite. "But, Bill, there's one thing that bothers me: there's a crooked cattle buyer somewhere near th' end of that drive trail that runs out of th' east end of this valley. He ain't paid for th' last herd of stolen animals he bought from this gang. He's got seventy-five hundred dollars that belongs to Jane Ricketts, an' which she shore can use. After we clean things up around here, I got to foller that trail an' get that money, somehow; an' I don't know th' first thing about what I'm goin' up ag'in'. I don't know who he is, or where he is; but mebby we can make some feller do some talkin' if we go about it right."

Bill was duly grateful for the total absence of remarks about letting the

prisoners get away from him; he shared in the almost universal friendliness for Jane Ricketts, and he was nursing a rapidly growing admiration and respect for the man at his side. He grinned slyly as he felt in his pockets for tobacco and papers.

"Huh," he grunted placidly. "I reckon mebby we can get somebody to talk." He opened and shut his thick fingers, regarding them gravely. "Funny thing, what you just told me. Me an' Jim have been fair honin' to meet a crooked cattle buyer most all of our sinful lives. I figger th' three of us oughta be able to call that turn without much trouble."

Mesquite looked keenly at him, and his smile contained a little warmth. He felt in his vest pocket.

"I reckon mebby we can," he said, and handed his companion a match.

CHAPTER 21 - THINGS MADE CLEAR

Jim returned to the camp with the two horses, stripped the riding gear from them and from Mesquite's horse as well, and looked inquiringly at the latter.

"Turn 'em loose or picket?" he asked.

"Picket; can't have 'em wanderin' to th' edge of th' cliff for some rustler to see," replied Mesquite.

In a few moments Jim turned to join the two cheerful deputies, and they arose at his approach.

"We'll have a look down below," suggested Mesquite, "an' then we can begin to think about somethin' to eat. It's early for that, though."

They walked to the foot of the little slope leading to the edge of the bluff, and crawled the rest of the way. The scene immediately below them was viewed first, and the newcomers did not doubt that it would be read correctly.

"Ace-high layout," muttered Jim as his gaze took in the extent of the valley, its plentiful water supply, and the quality and quantity of the grass covering it. "Everythin' was comin' their way, an' nobody suspected 'em."

"Yeah," grunted Bill thoughtfully, "an' if that locoed Charley Lennox had killed old Tobe farther off th' trail, they'd all be doin' a fine business right now, with nobody to bother 'em."

Mesquite nodded.

"Or if I hadn't taken a short cut into this country, or if I'd hit th' reg'lar trail this side of where them tracks was, they'd be doin' business. A little thing like three, four hundred yards, out on a desert where a mile ain't noticed, stacked th' deck ag'in' 'em. An' here we are, waitin' to chip in on th' last deal, our hands full of

winnin' cards."

"Who killed that cayuse down there?" asked Jim, his eyes on the animal at the edge of the bench.

"Bull, in a towerin' fit of rage," answered Mesquite. "Reckon you boys oughta know all that I do about this game, if you feel like listenin'."

"Shoot," said Bill, grinning in anticipation.

"Shore," endorsed Jim.

It took considerable time to unfold the tale, but they had plenty of that, without anything to do until the rustlers came into the valley, and then, perhaps, they would remain inactive until after dark. It was not intended to take the offensive until the following night. When the story was finished both men were frankly looking their appreciation of the part their companion had played, but beyond a casual remark or two they remained silent. Suddenly Bill remembered something, and he looked at Mesquite.

"You forgot to tell about th' crooked cattle buyer," he said. "Jim don't know nothin' about that."

"Neither do we," replied Mesquite, but he told what little he did know.

"Huh!" growled Jim. "I ain't got th' least idear who he might be."

"I kinda figgered that th' three of us might be able to find that out," said Bill. "Anyhow, I declared you in."

"You did right. I reckon Haskins can struggle along without us for a while," chuckled Jim. "There's two things about that whole game that interest me a whole lot: to see a crooked cattle buyer with handcuffs on, an' th' sight of seventy-five hundred dollars, all in one roll. I ain't never seen one or th' other, but now I got hopes of seein' both."

When the sun reached the meridian the three deputies wriggled backward and returned to camp, there to eat a cold meal from cans. The rations threatened to be insufficient if they were to spend much time in the vicinity; but on this point they were optimistic, for Mesquite had told them of the generous food supplies down in the hut.

Back again on the rim of the cliff they watched lazily and somewhat anxiously through the afternoon, and it was late in the day when they espied a group of riders top out on the ridge near the cañon. They rode in a string, and at that distance could not be counted; but by the time they reached the foot of the long slope they had spread out and rode nearly abreast.

"Four," said Jim. "Didn't you say there oughta be five?"

"Yes," answered Mesquite. "One of 'em is missin'."

"Oh, he'll come pokin' along," said Bill cheerfully. "If he don't, we'll know where to find him."

"I reckon he will," remarked Mesquite. "They got a job to do that needs five men. They been losin' a lot of time, with one thing an' another. They're right anxious to get started."

Steadily the four riders drew nearer, and in due time reached the bottom of the bench before the hut. The watchers wriggled back a bit and flattened.

"I figger this is goin' to be right interestin'," whispered Bill. "Watch 'em change when they see it!"

Pecos, acting in the unofficial capacity of guide, reached the top of the bench half a length in advance of his companions. He was looking backward and talking to the man behind him, and now he faced about. His glance was straight ahead, toward the door of the hut, but something in the corner of his eye took his instant attention, and he drew rein sharply. The other three, following his look, stopped as abruptly.

"My Gawd!" he shouted. "It's *Bull!!*"

The group surged and erupted, the four men rising as one as they cleared their saddles, and all four raced forward, guns drawn, and stopped at the body; but they were not all looking at the body, for three of them felt very apprehensive and faced in three different directions, hoping that it was needless. They made fine targets, out in the open, for anybody hidden behind a rock. Then they saw the second body, but for a moment it did not hold their real interest, which was more concerned about the living than about the dead.

Pecos turned the body over, placed the hat over the face, and arose.

"Shot twice!" he said loudly. "An'—who's that?" he quickly demanded, staring at the other quiet shape, which now held his amazed gaze. "What th' hell has happened here? Is that—is that Charley?"

He hastened forward, bent down, and turned the gruesome object over, his face expressing a great disbelief.

"What th' hell do you know about this? It's Charley! It's Charley Lennox! Shot right plumb through th' heart! Charley came back! Then what happened to—?" He had sense enough to shut his mouth and think a little before he used it again.

"Why, Larry an' Al both went lookin' for him! They was scared he'd get caught!"

He looked searchingly over the ground and about the base of the cliff, and then, worried about something which he kept to himself, he set out to make the search active, hoping that there would be at least one more. Larry! Larry, the man they had sent out to follow and kill Charley! If he was dead he could not talk.

"Spread out, fellers!" he ordered. "Search good, all around here: there ain't no tellin' what's up!"

The squad obeyed, and advanced somewhat in a line past the hut and toward the detritus. The combination of broad daylight and such perfect cover made them slightly nervous, but they pushed on doggedly if slowly.

"Hi!" shouted Ed Jones as he went around a particularly high and massive boulder. "Hi! Look here!"

They were at his side almost as the words died out, and Pecos leaned down and gingerly turned the ghastly find.

"Great jumpin' mavericks!" he cried, turning a wondering face up to his companions. "This is Al. Al Lennox! Th' whole top of his head is missin'!" He stood as if stunned, looking down at the body, conjectures crowding his cunning brain. In a flash he knew the answer, but he was not certain that he cared to have it known by the others.

Ed Jones reached down and picked up the Colt which lay near Al's outstretched hand. He turned the cylinder and then passed the gun around.

"He didn't fire a shot," he said. "Take a look at them other guns."

Jim Colson and Phil Cooke obeyed, the former going on to the farther body while the latter stopped at the nearer.

Cooke picked up the rifle, saw the empty shell in the chamber, pumped it out, and then pumped out the magazine.

"There was two fired if this gun was full," he said, facing Pecos; and then he caught one of the last lingering rays of the sun gleaming on something to the left of Pecos and behind him. "What's that, over there?" he asked, pointing.

Pecos went over and picked up an empty rifle shell.

"Forty-five seventy. What's yourn?" asked Pecos.

"Th' same. That makes th' two shots from this gun."

Jim Colson was walking toward them, Bull's Colt in his hand. He was slowly turning the cylinder and counting to himself.

"Two empties an' three good ones," he said.

"One for Charley, an' one for Al," suggested Ed Jones. "They was both shot plumb in front. Stands to reason they wasn't shootin' at each other, bein' brothers

an' comin' together, an' it looks like they was both lookin' for Bull. Three-corner fight, an' he got 'em both before he died. Good shootin', by Gawd!"

"But why was they lookin' for Bull?" asked Jim Colson curiously.

"Bull socked th' spurs into Charley every time he got th' chance," answered Pecos, thankful that Bull had had his own way when it came to riding in for the Lazy S outfit. Pecos had wanted to remain at the hut, but Bull had overridden him. "An' if he didn't have a chance to sock in th' spurs, he made one. There was right bad blood between 'em. Charley swore he would get him. But why did Al take a hand?" he asked, knowing the answer and hoping that no one else did.

"Charley was Al's brother, wasn't he?" asked Ed Jones ironically.

"Yes, he was," admitted Pecos, his back and sides wet with nervous perspiration. "Reckon he couldn't keep Charley from tryin' it, an' did th' best he could by backin' him up; an' Bull got 'em both before he went under!"

"Well, they're dead," said Phil Cooke. "Then let's bury 'em."

He saw the dead horse and looked at it inquiringly. "But who shot th' hoss?" he asked.

"Bull," answered Pecos. "Killed it in a fit of rage. He acted like a madman."

Cooke turned, looked from Bull's body to Charley's, and on to the boulder.

"Well, I reckon mebby he had one too many fits," he said. "Charley saved somebody else from havin' to do it. Like to see th' damn' bully try to sock any spurs into me! Well, are we goin' to cover 'em?"

"Take 'em away from the house!" hastily ordered Pecos, and he glanced at the dead horse, coupled to the other bodies by the same thought. "We got to drag that hoss away, too, before many hours pass." The buzzing of the swarm of flies on it sounded loud in the momentary silence.

All four jobs were done with dispatch; and well to the west of the house, where a plentiful supply of material was conveniently at hand, there now was a pile of stones which covered all three of the fighters.

Mesquite wriggled back from the rim, slowly and reluctantly followed by his companions. On the faces of all three were looks of satisfaction and relief. The voices below had been pitched so high that every word reached the top of the bluff clearly and distinctly.

"They read it like they should," commented Jim in a low voice.

"They read it like a pack of wolves would read it," growled Bill. "You'd reckon they was talkin' about—well, dogs— instead of fellers that had been their friends. They're a bunch of coyotes, every last one of 'em."

Again they had a cold meal from cans and soon were back at the edge of the cliff, looking down through the growing dark. For half an hour they watched in silence, and then Mesquite's hand reached out and touched his nearest companion's arm.

"I'm goin' down ag'in," he whispered. "Bruce Rankin didn't come with 'em to-day, an' I want to learn why, if I can. Three make more noise than one, an' can't listen any better. You boys stay up here till I get back."

They whisperingly consented, although it was with reluctance, and they were soon alone.

Mesquite reached the bottom of the cliff without mishap and was soon in his regular place on the telltale ledge.

At first the conversation that he heard was mostly concerned with the grim tragedy that had taken place outside the hut, but occasionally someone would start another topic. At last came one for which he had been waiting, coupled closely to another.

"Didn't Rankin say he'd foller us right away?" asked Pecos, during a lull in the general talk.

"He had to go to th' bunkhouse for another pair of boots," explained Ed Jones. "Ripped th' heel an' half th' sole off th' one he was wearin'. Reckon it took him longer than he figgered on. He'll be here in th' mornin', anyhow."

"Yeah, an when he comes," said Cooke, "he'll want to know somethin' about Larry."

"Which is somethin' I'd shore like to know, myself," said Pecos, telling the exact truth; but it was his secret belief that Larry had accomplished the first part of his mission: the finding of Charley Lennox. If that was so then he certainly bungled the rest of the job. It looked to Pecos that Larry had been caught in the attempt to kill Charley and that he had, himself, been killed. This would explain the deadly hostility of Al and Charley, as evidenced by the ghastly tragedy outside. They not only had killed Larry, but they had learned who sent him on his mission. Again Pecos was glad that Bull had insisted on remaining at the hut.

He changed the subject.

"Well, there's three less to come in for a cut of this cake," he said, "an' three less to share in th' money of that last herd. Now I'm right glad old Tight-Fist didn't have th' money to pay us for 'em then. We're just that much better off."

"You can bet every cent of yore share of both drives that he'll have th' money to pay for *this* herd, or he don't get it," said Jim Colson. "I wouldn't trust that thief as far as I can see him." He looked around. "If this herd goes to 'Dobe Springs, it

don't go a damn step farther until old Wilcox pays every cent he owes us."

"Who'd you say, Jim?" asked Phil Cooke, pausing in his talk with Ed Jones.

"Old Tight-Fist Wilcox, over to 'Dobe Springs. You know, I've been kinda expectin' him to drop in an' ask about his cattle. We've held him up this year longer'n we ever done before, even th' time when he came down to raise hell about it."

"Didn't he used to be an Injun Agent in th' old days?" asked Cooke.

"Yeah, that's where he got his start an' his peculiar trainin'."

"Well, he'll get another start, of a different kind, an' some more trainin', if he starts crowdin' this gang, or springin' any tricks on it," growled Jones. "But, say, that mebby explains somethin': I've wondered from time to time where he sold th' cattle. If he's an old Injun Agent, he's mebby sellin' 'em to one of th' same an' drivin' right through to some reservation. If he's doin' that an' th' agent is anythin' like himself, then we ain't gettin' near our share."

"But what'll he do with th' young cattle, then?" asked Pecos. "Th' government specifications won't let them in, will they?"

Jones burst into loud and unexpected laughter.

"If he can find a feller like himself, they won't only fit into any specifications ever writ, but they'll be counted twice an' then weighed by a blind man. A cow is a cow to an Injun, two cows to an agent, an' there won't be even a skin left to prove anythin'. They accept th' herd, sign th' warrant, an' turn 'em right over to th' tribe. Ever see Injuns eat issue beef? Make you sick! We shore have got to ask Wilcox a few interestin' questions."

"Yeah, an' get a few slick an' interestin' lies for our answers," chuckled Pecos. "You ever met old Frank? Huh! Reckoned you hadn't!" He chuckled again. "If we don't get that herd on th' drive right soon you shore will see him. Frank's allus willin' to meet a dollar more'n halfway. If he don't show up here, we'll meet him somewhere along th' trail. You see if we don't."

"Well, if he wants to see me throw my arms around his neck, he wants to have th' money for that last herd, an' have it right handy in his pants' pocket," said Jones.

"If he's worried, an' wonderin' why we ain't got th' cattle to him, he mebby will have it," said Pecos. "He may figger that we're holdin' 'em up because we ain't got our pay for th' last herd."

Mesquite wriggled backward, silently arose to his feet, and left the ledge. He was filled with elation. Reaching the top of the cliff, he went close to the silent watchers on its rim and called softly. In a moment they joined him and followed

him back to the camp.

"Time to turn in, I reckon," he said slowly; "but I got some news to tell, an' it won't take very long. You fellers want to hear it?"

"Shore! I'm all ears, like a jackass," said Bill encouragingly.

"You can cut out everythin' between th' first an' last words, Bill," said his friend, "an' then I'll admit yo're tellin th' truth."

"Rankin will be here in th' mornin'," said Mesquite. "That means th' work will begin to-morrow an' that we can start our deal to-morrow night."

"Good thing, too," said Bill. "Our grub's gettin' low."

"An' th' feller they've been callin' Tight-Fist, th' feller that's buyin' their cattle, is somebody by th' name of Frank Wilcox, over at 'Dobe Springs. He used to be an Injun Agent in th' days when that was th' crookedest job west of th' Mississippi."

"Hell you say!" exclaimed Jim with great interest. "Why, I've talked to that old coyote more'n once. Talked to him right in Desert Wells couple years back. Said he was tourin' th' country, playin' poker. Played draw in Parsons' Saloon a couple nights an' cleaned out th' town. He wears three kinda guns. Forty-five on th' hip, thirty-eight under his left arm, an' a thirty-two Derringer on an elastic up his sleeve. He's at home in any kind of company an' expects to die of old age."

"'Dobe Springs? Frank Wilcox?" muttered Bill, and then he laughed. "Hell, Mesquite: we ain't goin' very far, an' we ain't goin' to have much of a job to do after we get there. Seein' that there's one of us for each of his guns, I reckon he'll die of old age in jail. You've shore taken half th' joy outa our little war party."

"I reckon there'll be enough to split three ways," replied Mesquite, smiling in the dark. "If you don't get enough joy out of that, then you follow me back from there an' come along with me when I hand that seventy-five hundred over to Jane Ricketts. You'll mebby get th' rest of th' joy right there an' then."

"Mesquite," said Jim, his hand going out in the dark and resting for an instant on Mesquite's arm, "I don't know who th' hell you are or where th' hell you come from, an' I don't hone to know; but I'm right glad to meet you. Me an' Bill both will take a lot of pleasure in seein' th' smile on that old lady's face. You damn old coyote, put her there!"

Mesquite gripped the hand and then shamefacedly let it fall.

"Let's roll up an' get some sleep," he said.

CHAPTER 22 - ALL SQUARE

Shortly after daylight the following morning the three deputies lay on their stomachs at the edge of the cliff, on what they hoped would be the last watch.

Below them in the valley there was purposeful movement: the cattle of the western half of the range were being rounded up and driven to a central point, yearlings and two-year-olds being omitted from the gathering herd whenever it was possible to do so. These were not wanted, and if included would only have to be cut out and driven off again. It made no difference whether these younger cattle were branded or not; they could wait until the more pressing duties and needs were taken care of. A few young cattle could be taken along, but not too many. Just now every effort was being made to get together a herd for the trail, for the start of a drive too long delayed. Things had come to a point where their market could wait no longer for them, and every day would count against them. Had these men worked as hard and conscientiously for their employer on the Lazy S, that ranch would never have reached its present unenviable condition.

From all points the cattle came. On the fringe of the round-up single animals and pairs and threes popped out of thickets or draws and were sent toward the central point, shortly becoming small streams. All morning this combing continued, and long before noon the circle of riders lay on a circumference less than half as long as it had been at the start of the work. The cattle were no longer isolated units spread out far apart; now they began to bunch, and they made a loose herd, still with plenty of room to move about. The men had been dropping out one at a time, to ride in to the hut, get something to eat, and to ride back again to relieve another man. The herd at last was formed and left under the charge of a single rider while his companions started at the eastern end of the valley to repeat the work.

Mesquite stirred and spoke, his voice a growl.

"They said this was to be th' big drive, th' real clean-up they all had been waitin' for, an' I'm agreein' with 'em that it is a big drive, for stolen stock. One more as big as this, an' th' Lazy S wouldn't have a cow left that was worth anythin'. Then I reckon they would 'a' turned their attention to th' Box O an' th' others."

"Fine big herd of cattle," said Jim. "When we get it back to th' Lazy S it'll shore make a difference to that ranch."

"It shore will, an' it's goin' back," growled Mesquite.

"It won't take long to get a bunch of th' boys together an' make th' drive," said Jim.

"Here comes th' missin'," announced Bill, from the left end of the little line. "Th' first rider is Bruce Rankin—I'd know him as far's I can see him; but who is th' other?"

In Mesquite's heart there bloomed a sudden and fierce hope: could it be old

Tight-Fist Wilcox, the crooked cattle buyer from Adobe Springs? He voiced his hope.

"Look anythin' like that Wilcox thief from 'Dobe Springs?" he asked.

"Hum!" muttered Jim thoughtfully. "Can't say, yet; but it don't look a whole lot unlike him. Judas priest! Wouldn't that be luck!"

"They said they wouldn't be surprised if he showed up," said Mesquite.

The riders came on steadily, the leader raising his hand to acknowledge the salute of the man riding herd. They were halfway between the bottom of the long western slope and the foot of the bench below the hut when Jim emitted a chuckle that was almost a cackle and jammed his elbows into Mesquite's side with more enthusiasm than consideration.

"It *is!*" he whispered. "It *is!* It's Frank Wilcox, come over to see why in hell these cattle ain't on th' trail. It's Wilcox himself! He's ridin' right into our waitin' arms! Judas priest! Us three are goin' to make a round-up that'll bust all records for these parts!"

Mesquite's eyes were glowing with frosty lights, and his face was cold and grim.

"There's somethin' you boys want to remember after we get down to that hut," he said. "A deppity ain't supposed to let himself get shot. If he can, he'll make an arrest; but if he can't, then he shoots; an' with this gang he'll shoot to kill if he has to pull trigger at all. Not one of them skunks are to get away! Not *one!*"

"No better gun was ever made," chuckled Bill, "than this old .44-40. Even when it's empty it does its tricks."

"Shut yore fool mouth!" snapped Jim, his face flushing.

"Keep quiet!" warned Mesquite: "they're gettin' too close for us to talk. You know how plain we can hear them down below."

They were getting too close. They were almost at the foot of the bench in front of the hut, and in a few minutes they were riding up the steep slope. Dismounting at the corral, they left their saddled animals with the reins hanging down and went into the building. Smoke soon rolled up out of the chimney and told its story. When they had eaten they came out again, and both went to the corral.

Wilcox stripped the gear from his horse and drove it into the enclosure, dropping saddle and bridle near the fence, while Rankin waited, astride.

"I'm goin' out to help th' boys, Frank," he said. "You make yoreself to home. When we all come in to-night we'll have our war talk an' split up that last herd money. You keep it in yore pocket till I tell you to take it out, an' then you hand it to *me* for th' splittin'. That'll let you out of all arguments an' mebby save you from some grudges."

"All right," replied the buyer; "but get a rustle on them fellers! I've got a big contract to fill, an' a hell of a long way to go before I do fill it, an' damn little time left. I've been layin' awake nights, sweatin' days, worryin' about this herd. Prod them, boys—drive 'em—an' get things hummin'!"

"They'll hum now that there's somebody here to make 'em hum," said Rankin, and he whirled and loped away.

All afternoon cattle moved steadily toward the common centre, and the dust climbed steadily higher in the heated air. It looked like confusion to an inexpert eye, but it was only confusing. Everything went smoothly, without a hitch, and by nightfall the cattle from all parts of the valley were held in one big, loose herd. Both men and cattle were tired, but the latter had been cleverly handled and their spirits had not been ruffled more than was necessary. Watered and bedded down, they could be counted upon to stay on the bed ground instead of showing any disposition to wander, and there were neither calves, weaners, nor yearlings to go bumming through the herd and start trouble. The night tricks of the riders would be calm and peaceful, and a man would have trouble to keep awake.

The men, with the exception of the rider with the herd, rode in for supper and rest, boisterous and vociferous despite the hard work they had done. One of the men, having eaten, rode back to take over the first trick with the herd, releasing the rider who had remained with it. The latter came in, had his supper, and joined in the talk.

Wilcox was greeted with pleasantries which ran the gamut, and some of the remarks could hardly have been called pleasantries, having to do with money owed.

The supper had been noisier than usual, and the comments frank and free. Wilcox had eaten at even pace with the others, and gave as good as he received, twitting them with the time they had wasted. They were now still seated around the table in attitudes of ease.

Rankin suddenly looked around quickly, doubting his eyes.

"Where's Bull? Out with th' herd? Did I see him to-day?" he asked.

Pecos leaned back and sighed. The moment he had dreaded had come. He and his companions had said nothing to Rankin about the tragedy, each one hoping that one of the others would make the plunge, and each quite willing to let the matter rest as it was until they were all together in the hut. Besides, there had been practically no chance to tell the news as it should have been told, while the work was going on.

"Bull's dead," said Pecos lugubriously, and saw nodding heads endorse the

statement.

"*Dead!*" shouted Rankin, half arising from his box. "Dead? Who killed him, an' when?"

"Charley Lennox," answered Pecos, "with Al to back him up."

"Where's Charley an' Al?" thundered Rankin ominously.

"They're both dead," said Pecos, and again nodding heads gave him moral support.

"Great Gawd!" cried the foreman, looking incredulously around. "When did it happen? How did it happen? Where did it happen? Ain't you got a tongue?"

Pecos told the story, running back far enough in time to give a proper understanding of the conditions that led up to it. At its conclusion Rankin dropped his hands on the table and swore under his breath; but then his face brightened, and he was smiling again when he looked around.

"Charley was too dangerous to have around, bein' nothing but sheriff bait," he said complacently. "Al was a decent sort of kid, but he was a holder-back; know what I mean? Yeah, a holder-back. Had to be pushed all th' time. Bully would 'a' been killed by some other of us, so that ain't so bad; an' it means that we divide our profits among three less men. But where's Larry?" he demanded suddenly, his face growing hard and tense.

"Larry ain't got back yet," said Pecos, anger showing on his face. "Went ridin' off up th' drive trail, us bein' too tame for him. Wanted some excitement, an' all hell couldn't 'a' kept him here. Said he'd be back in time to help with th' round-up an' drive; but I knowed damn well he wouldn't. Larry just walked out from under an' left th' work for us to do. An' I'm askin', here an' now, where th' hell he gets any right to expect to cut in on th' money that he ain't worked for? He ain't got no right to have a full share!"

"That ain't like him," growled Rankin. "It ain't like him a-tall; but boys will be boys. Mebby he'll show up in time to help with th' drive."

"He'd better show up!" growled Pecos. "You figger he's entitled to a full share in th' money?" he persisted, glancing encouragingly around the table. His friends were quick to take the hint, and growls arose to tell Rankin that he might choose to walk on dangerous ground.

"Not a full share, mebby," grudgingly admitted the foreman, but secretly determined that it would be a full share; "but he done some of th' work, an' he's comin' in for a part share!"

"Long's that part share ain't more than a half, it suits me," said Pecos, tired in his mind from the strain of acting the part he had chosen. He flattered himself

that he had done real well, and he felt greatly relieved.

It had grown dark by now, and had any of the rustlers wandered out of the hut and looked searchingly at a certain place on the face of the cliff they might have seen three specks, three small blobs in the darkness, moving slowly and cautiously down a series of crevices and breaks. The three blobs reached the bottom and stole in single file along a ledge which slanted up and then ran level behind the house. There they sank down and became lost in the gloom of the ledge.

Dishes rattled as they were pushed to the middle of the table and elbows took their places. There was an air of expectancy about Pecos and two of his companions.

"You boys shouldn't 'a' held things up like you have," said Wilcox accusingly as he filled an odorous pipe.

"Oh, shouldn't we?" said Pecos unpleasantly. "We've had enough trouble to hold up three drives; but most of th' trouble was that we hadn't been paid for that last herd we delivered. You remember anythin' about that?"

"I shore do," said Wilcox quickly, congratulating himself that he had guessed the real trouble and that he had come prepared to smooth it out. "Not only do I remember it, but I brought th' money with me, to pay off th' debt, an' start fresh."

"Did you bring any for *this* herd?" inquired Pecos.

"Th' herd ain't been delivered, but I brought part of it; I can't pay it all till I collect at th' other end." He spread his hands impressively. "You boys don't have to worry about th' pay: I figger to do business with you as long as you have any cattle to sell. I've got to play square with you."

"Then it might be a good idear to dig up th' money that we earned last year," said Pecos meaningly, and Phil Cooke and Ed Jones added their instant affirmations.

Back on the ledge Mesquite nudged his companions. It would be so much simpler, as far as that herd money was concerned, to take it in a lump sum from one man instead of having to search a number of men for their individual shares. The three deputies cautiously arose and moved slowly and silently down the ledge, reaching the bench not far from the corral. They kept close to the base of the cliff, where the darkness was more intense, and crept along it toward the hut. There were two windows and one door in the building, the windows being in each end, and the windows and the doors were open.

Their plan of action had been discussed and decided upon. Jim was to take charge of the window in the west end; Bill, that in the east, while Mesquite was

to take the door. At the signal both Jim and Bill were to shove their guns in through the openings and to call out, thus letting the gang know that they were covered on all three sides. This would throw them into greater confusion and interfere with any concerted action on their part.

"Just as you say, Pecos," remarked Wilcox, plunging a hand deep into a pocket. "I ain't interested in how this money is divided. All I care about is to pay you boys off for that herd. I'll hand it to Rankin when he tells me to, an' he can take care of th' rest of it. He can divide it as you say. That suit you?"

"Reckon it's good enough," said Pecos, hitching up his chair, his eyes on the roll of bills. "Th' shares won't be no trouble. I'm th' only man left of th' Ace of Clubs outfit. Th' rule was that th' Ace of Clubs got th' money an' kept two thirds of it. Th' other third was divided into five parts. Two of these went to Rankin, th' foreman; an' one went to each of his men. You can hand th' money to *me*, Wilcox, an' I'll pay off."

"What th' hell you mean?" snapped Rankin, his words rising above those of his men. "You keep two thirds an' split th' rest between me an' my boys?"

"Th' Ace of Clubs allus got two thirds!" insisted Pecos, evil lights playing in his eyes. "I don't see no reason to change it."

"Yes, it did, when there was four of you an' you did most of th' work!" shouted Rankin, half rising in his seat. "Now who're doin' th' work? Are you doin' th' work that th' whole Ace of Clubs outfit used to do?" he yelled sarcastically. "Are you?"

"I'm th' Ace of Clubs," retorted Pecos. "I'm th' survivin' owner, an' th' interests of th' others have come to me. Th' Ace of Clubs is entitled to two thirds of all herd money, an' th' money for last year's herd was earned by th' Ace of Clubs, even if it's only bein' paid for now. We *did* most of that work, an' we're entitled to our two thirds."

"There's a hell of a lot of folks in this sweet world that don't get what they reckon they're entitled to," said Rankin, his eyes blazing. "An' yo're one of 'em!"

"Look here, Pecos," said Ed Jones, in a mild and pleasant voice, as if about to offer a new and convincing argument; and his argument, while not new, was very convincing.

Pecos turned to glare at the speaker, impatient at the interruption, and found himself staring into the black and dirty muzzle of a Colt .45.

"We share, an' share alike, beginnin' now," said Jones, grinning. "Wilcox, you hand that money over to Rankin; an' you Pecos, don't you bat an eye!"

"I'll not hand over any money until every man here admits that I'm payin' for that last year's herd," said Wilcox grimly.

"Admit it, Pecos," ordered Jones quietly. "I'd just as soon come in for my part of yore share. Admit it!"

"What else can I do?" snarled Pecos, holding down his rage. "Go ahead, Wilcox: pay th' damn crooks!"

Rankin laughed nastily and held out his hand.

"Pay me," he said, grinning. "Pecos, th' survivin' heir an' owner of th' Ace of Clubs, is willin'. Pay me, Rankin, Mr. Wilcox."

"All right, then; here's th' pay for last year's cattle, in full," said the buyer, putting the roll into the eager and outstretched hand.

"First," said Rankin calmly, "Larry gets a full share, which I'll keep for him till he shows up. Then—"

"I'll take it all, Rankin," said a cold, vibrant voice from the door.

"Hands up!" came simultaneous shouts from the windows.

There were now plain to be seen two grim faces and glinting Colts framed by the window casings, with a black void behind them; and in the door stood the full-length figure of a man, a man whose hands hung by their thumbs to his gun belts. Just below them lay the stained walnut handles of a pair of Colts, snug in their holsters.

"I said I'd take it all, Rankin," he repeated.

Ed Jones already had his gun out, covering Pecos; all he needed to do was to turn his wrist and relax his thumb. Rankin, half erect, suddenly moved his hand to knock off the lamp; and as he did so, Jones turned his wrist. There came a double report from the door, a crashing deafening report, and the gray smoke spurted and swirled through the room. Rankin fell forward, Jones backward; and the rest held up their hands in panicky self-preservation.

"Come in, boys," ordered Mesquite, his guns steady as rocks. "Cuff these fellers, an' get ready for th' man with th' herd. He must be Jim Colson, an' he'll be ridin' in to take sides."

His brother deputies hastened to perform their work, and in a few minutes the prisoners were cuffed, disarmed, and being led to the corral, to get them out of the way. Bill remained with them, while Jim went with Mesquite. They picked up the bodies of Rankin and Jones and carried them out of the hut and around back of it. Then they moved slowly, on foot, down the slope of the bench, to await the coming of the curious herd guard.

They did not have long to wait. Jim Colson, cursing all gangs that fought among themselves, came racing up out of the dark, shouting inquiries. He was half up the bench when a shot rang out and his horse dropped from under him. Before

he could pick himself up he was pounced upon, cuffed, and his gun taken from him.

"What th' hell's this mean?" he snarled, struggling in vain.

"Ask th' sheriff," said Jim.

"You mean that we're—that we're—"

"Just that, whatever it does mean," answered the deputy.

"But th' rest of th' boys?"

"Two are dead an' th' rest are wearin' steel. Come along an' see for yoreself!"

"Great Gawd!" muttered Colson, slumping dejectedly.

Daylight saw a procession form and start up the valley toward the cañon, the great basin, and the town of Desert Wells, where an adobe jail waited to offer its crowded hospitality. Nightfall found a happy crew of volunteer punchers dismounting at the hut to finish the round-up on the next day and to start a drive that would lead westward instead of eastward, which would end on the range of the Lazy S instead of the town of Adobe Springs, a round-up and drive of every animal in the valley.

Mid forenoon of the second day following saw the herd turned loose on the low-lying, rich pastureland of the ranch from which its units had originally come.

Three men left the cheerful and expectant drive crew and rode at a lope up the slopes and over the ridges toward the ranch house. They dismounted before the kitchen door as it opened to reveal an old woman whose curiosity was plainly to be read.

"Well?" she demanded. "You back ag'in?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Mesquite, trying to keep from smiling.

"What you want?" she asked, her face wrinkling into a pretended expression of ferocity.

"Want to take you for a little ride, ma'am," said Mesquite humbly.

"'Ma'am'!" she snorted. "Well, I ain't goin'!"

"Want to show you somethin' that you'll be right glad to see," said Mesquite, the smile winning the struggle and breaking through.

"You look more human, now, with that silly grin on yore face," she said. "What is there on this ranch that's worth lookin' at?"

Mesquite turned to Jim and Bill, and nodded; and straightway they raced for the stable and became blunderingly eager to harness a horse and hitch it to the old buckboard.

"'Ma'am,'" said Mesquite, "there *is* somethin' worth lookin' at on this ranch.

"Will you come peaceful or will we have to take you?" he demanded, showing his badge.

"Shucks!" she snorted, her bright eyes searching his face. "Take me, indeed! I'd like to see anybody take Jane Ricketts any place she don't want to go. Will you drive th' buckboard like you ain't goin' to a dance or a fire or somethin'?

"Drive it right careful, ma'am," he replied.

"Ma'am!" she snorted, and whisked back into the house for her sun bonnet.

Five minutes later a buckboard, drawn almost at a funeral pace, its aged horse in the capable but entirely unnecessary grasp of two riders, moved from the ranch house of the Lazy S and headed northward. Its passenger of state, fidgeting more and more, finally stated her mind.

"Land sakes, this a funeral?"

The two riders loosed their holds and fell back, the man with the reins made loud and strange sounds, and the buckboard rolled forward at a speed of six miles an hour, which seemed enough to the horse, the driver, and the passenger. It jolted and bounced and rocked and shivered over the rough pastureland, and then suddenly stopped on the very top of a ridge.

"There's th' sight, ma'am," said the driver, his left arm pointing. "There's yore cattle."

It was a sight to gladden the heart of any person who had been facing poverty. The great herd was spreading out, its units eager to embrace their freedom, and to one side a group of motionless riders sat in their saddles, their eyes on the buckboard on the top of the ridge.

It was the riders who broke the spell. Their guns leaped up and roared, their hats went up to wave wildly, and cheers rolled up the slope.

"You got 'em back!" whispered the old lady, tears in her eyes and starting down her cheeks. "You got 'em back!"

"Yes, ma'am; most of 'em. I had to take pay for th' others," said Mesquite, placing a huge roll of bills in the wrinkled old hands and gently closing the toil-worn fingers over it.

"Ma'am!" she snorted, her voice breaking and the tears falling unresisted. "'Ma'am!'" she repeated, and leaned her old head on the young shoulder so conveniently handy.

"Maw, I should 'a' said," he replied, and then looked up into the sky to see what was the matter with it, a scrutiny shared by two of Sheriff Haskins's best deputies. There was nothing the matter with it, but the pretense came in handy.

THE END